FETTERLESS,

Though Bound Together.

BY

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Proud Pearl's Caprice.

Violet and Her Lovers.

A WOMAN'S WILL, AND HER WAY.

CHAPTER V.

A GLIMPSE INTO BOHEMIA.

BEFORE allowing Vincenzo to give his account of Hester's girlish days, it may be as well to glance back into them without so evilly-disposed a guide, and if the kind reader will have a little patience, he or she will be able to judge of the chances our heroine had in her first start in life.

We will therefore go back to the time when Hugh Temple—the English baronet, who eventually adopted Hester—arrived in Paris.

Hugh was a young, light-hearted, good-tempered Englishman—frank, genial, jolly. He came to Paris full of ambition, his father was still living, and young Hugh had not come into either the title or the property. Having a natural aptitude for drawing, the chance word of a great master had determined his career, and Hugh, on being told, "With study and perseverance you also may become an artist, for you have great talent," resolved that study and perseverance should not be wanting on his part, and, strange to say, he kept his word.

His father made him a handsome allowance, and young Hugh, with money to back him, was soon made to feel that there was *nothing* beyond his reach.

It was the certainty of that income, however, which ruined all his hopes of becoming a *great* artist. Necessity is the

mother of invention, as we all know, and with necessity, instead of £500 a year to depend on, Hugh would have been forced to work, and might, and probably would, have done great things.

As it was, though he honestly strove to keep the promise made to the master, and did work steadily, with patience and perseverance, still there was no necessity for it, and it would frequently happen, when he had been out to theatres or supper parties over-night, that the young man felt quite unfit for the steady work and unremitting attention required of him at the studio, where he was supposed to bring all his intellect to bear, and to strain every nerve in the reproduction of the models before him.

Hugh, knowing that his dinner would be paid for quite as easily without his exerting

himself in the least, even began to look on earnest work as rather a bore, and after a while only went to the studio when he had "nothing better to do."

This came to be more and more frequently the case after he had made the acquaintance of Hector Wylde, a talented young scapegrace, the scion of a noble English house, but who had fallen into utter disgrace with his family in consequence of a madcap exploit practised on one of the dons at his college.

Wylde, a reckless, extravagant, but not a wicked young fellow, disgusted with the ultra-severity of his aristocratic relations, ran away from his home, and, having proved to himself that he had an aptitude for drawing, determined to try his luck in Paris.

Once arrived there he wrote home to say

that he had turned over a new leaf—stated that he meant to work thoroughly, and begged for a sum of money that would defray the expenses of the academy he intended to study at for one year.

The wealthy old uncle whom he had most grievously offended, sent his agent to Paris, and this man, acting under orders, paid a handsome fee to Messrs. Rude and Bonnet, where Wylde intended to work, and bade those gentlemen on no account advance one penny to the young spendthrift. To them the usual stipend was secured for a term of three years.

Thus Wylde was soon established as an art-student on nothing a year.

It may be imagined that young Temple's appearance at the studio was hailed with intense delight by his impecunious countryman, and as Wylde was a thoroughly

amusing companion, these young fellows soon fraternised; and, indeed, it was not long before Wylde had made himself so indispensable to his friend Temple, that the latter begged him to come and share his apartment, and live at his expense.

Wylde, nothing loth, brought his portmanteau and settled down comfortably in his friend's lodgings, finding this idle companionship far more to his tastes than the drudgery of the *atelier*. The two young men soon came to be known as "the Inseparables," and the sincere affection reckless Wylde felt for his generous young friend and patron was perhaps the best trait in his very commonplace character. Presently a time came when that friendship was put to a severe test, and we shall see whose conduct proved the nobler under the trial.

Temple, who had *not* abandoned the studio entirely, though he had grown dilatory, had begun the sketch of a beautiful female head. The girl who sat as model was young and very handsome, and Temple worked at his sketch with real interest.

He told Wylde so much of this charming young creature, that that harum-scarum was impelled by a sudden curiosity to go to the studio himself and see the girl. He also greatly admired her, so much so that he pursued her with attentions which became objectionable to her, for she had not been used to Parisian life and its libertinage. She had just come from Provence, and was still wholly unspoilt by flattery or bad example. Indeed, she had but little experience of either.

Wylde's ambiguous attentions, therefore,

were most distasteful to her, and one fine morning when she was expected at the studio she did not appear. For many subsequent days both Temple and Wylde attended regularly, hoping to see the lovely model again, but in vain. Inquiries were made at her lodgings and of the other models, but not a trace could be discovered of the beautiful, modest, dark-eyed Nita.

Time, the remorseless and yet kindly healer of all wounds and anxieties, went steadily on, and in his regular course brought perfect oblivion to Wylde as to the lovely though timid Provençale.

Not so to Temple, who, though he had in no manner betrayed his feelings to the girl, *had* felt deeply and tenderly for her. Indeed, he had fallen in love for the first time, and was terribly wroth at the insult-

ing jests in which his reckless friend indulged at Nita's expense.

The 'inseparables' almost quarrelled over this affair; but the fact of Nita's mysterious disappearance bridged over the chasm commencing to divide them, and their mutual regret at her loss drew them together again as they condoled with one another.

Nearly a year had passed when Temple, who had done a good day's work at the *atelier*, proposed to Wylde that they should make merry together that evening, and spend it in the gardens of a *café chantant* which had just been opened in the most frequented part of the Champs Elysées.

They went.

It was a glorious summer night. There was no moon, but myriads of stars were shimmering with tenfold lustre in the deep blue vault of the boundless heavens.

The gardens of the *café* were full of a noisy, chattering, laughing crowd. The leaves were whispering, moved by the light breath of the passing summer wind, the rows and chains of coloured lamps were lighted, the *garçons* in their short black jackets and long white aprons were running hither and thither in orderly confusion—if such a contradiction may be pardoned.

The fact is they ran wildly hither and thither, and though apparently without any settled purpose, they were in reality very systematic in the fulfilling of their various errands.

At the further end of the gardens, in brilliant relief against the surrounding dark foliage stood the mimic stage, the front scene of a theatre which formed a set-off to the circle of ladies who meant

presently to delight or amuse the audience with their warblings.

A row of footlights enhanced the brilliant colouring with which these ladies were wont to increase their attractions, and to the unaccustomed eye the whole scene was a very remarkable one.

Out in a garden sat a semicircle of women in fashionable evening costume, all of them inclined to be very liberal in the display of the shoulders and arms—mostly very plump ones—with which nature had endowed them.

A vaulted roof, perhaps star-spangled in imitation of the heavens above, formed an arch above their much-adorned heads, and in front of them, beyond the footlights, was the orchestra, vigorously fiddling, drumming, and fifing; and beyond that again came a multitude of

seething, expectant, upturned faces—the faces of the audience, seated, not in row after row, as in a theatre, but at small tables placed at close intervals, on which stood their cups of coffee or chocolate, or the *petites verres* of absinthe or cognac, or the larger and still more dangerous jorums of 'punch au rhum' or kirschwasser.

At one of these tables Temple and Wylde were seated, both amused by the people and the scene about them, both inclined to make derogatory remarks on the full-blown charms of the matrons in cerise, and green, and yellow silk or satin, who were trying to simper like young girls as they sat in that semicircle upon the mimic stage.

"What a jolly old girl that is!" said Wylde, as one of the singers—a youthful simperer of some sixty summers—stepped

forward, gave a vigorous kick to throw her amber satin train well back, and after a profusion of exceedingly lowly curtseys, commenced a rollicking maritime song, of which the constant refrain was—

Hollala, tralala!" intended as a reproduction of the chant of the sailors hauling the ropes or shifting the sails.

"If she was the skipper I should jump overboard," said Wylde, laughing.

"That's a decent-looking woman in the pale green," said Temple, as a prematurely-faded delicate young creature stepped forward, and in a high soprano shrieked out the bravura air from "Robert le Diable," to which the audience listened with evident attention.

"Poor creature, she looks as if she had scarcely breath left in her wasted body for another such terrible effort," said

Temple, who always compassionated women that had to earn their own bread in this or in any other fashion.

"It's all very well to pity her," said Wylde impatiently; "but I think the pity is more required by us, who have to look at such a bag of bones, and listen to such painful shrieks."

Temple, meanwhile, was holding a whispered colloquy with the head waiter, the result of which was a large bouquet thrown at the feet of the miserable-looking singer who had been trying her delicate lungs so sorely for the benefit of her not very sympathetic audience.

The bouquet was not a startling occurrence, for almost all the ladies at a *café chantant* manage to obtain these floral trophies. If chance or generosity does not yield them these valued offerings, they

manage to procure them before hand, and give them to a *garçon*; he in his turn hands them to some gay young student who is only too pleased and proud to fling them on the stage *in propriâ personâ*, and thus gain the second-hand applause of the visitors seated at the tables round about him.

Hugh Temple's bouquet, therefore, was no unusual occurrence, but the effect it produced on the wretched consumptive singer was.

This, however, was a little private scene, not enacted for the public benefit.

Mdlle. Soubrette, more from habit than with any anticipation, carefully unrolled the paper twisted around the stems of her flowers.

She surely could not have expected verses of admiration, or a love declaration, or the request for an assignation, to be

folded up there. Other bright, healthy, happier-looking girls, received these personal tributes to their charms, and time was, not so very long ago, when Mdlle. Soubrette also had read such lines addressed to herself.

Now she was wasting away, a prey to rapid, relentless consumption—the fell disease sure, sooner or later, to attack those unhappy women who spend the long summer evenings bare-necked, sitting out of doors.

What was it then that Soubrette found around *her* flower stems—what sent two hectic spots out on her cheeks, and made her wasted hands to tremble pitifully?

No letter, no request—only a roll of bank notes—*francs*, reader, not pounds sterling, but quite enough of the former to pay her doctor's bill and six months' board and lodging at her very economical *pension*.

Poor Soubrette! Prayers had not been much in her line for many years past, but when she reached her humble garret on this night she fell on her knees, and hiding her tearful face in the thin coverlet of her bed, she prayed the Father of all mercy to bless the generous donor of that kind, considerate, and totally unexpected gift.

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But we are leaving our artist friends an unconscionably long time in the gardens of the *café chantant.* The Soubrette had been succeeded by several other singers more or less stout and commonplace. The young men were beginning to feel bored, when suddenly they both extended a hand, and each grasped the other's in silent amazed expectation.

The orchestra had played the simple introduction to that most fascinating and

pathetic of all melodies—"La Chanson de Fortunio." The singer was not one of those "on parade" in the semi-circle, but one of more distinction, who, as is the wont of such, stepped forth, when her turn came, from behind the scenes.

The lady who now approached the footlights was totally different to all who had sung before her. *Really* young, slim, graceful, her head crowned by a coil of her own chestnut hair, and unadorned by any of the laces, bows, or flowers in which her companions delighted, clad in a simple black tulle dress, open at the throat and wrist, her only ornament one "red, red rose," fastened into her black satin waistband.

Such was the singer whose appearance had utterly amazed both Hugh and Hector, for in this lovely modest girl each recognised—

Nita!

They listened in breathless attention as she began to sing.

Her voice was pure and true, and her modest delivery suited the simplicity of the song to perfection.

The ordinary *café* audience did not appreciate so tranquil and refined a performance —how should they?—but in the hearts and heads of both the artists those pure, clear tones echoed for many a long day after.

Wylde was quite aware that he had grievously offended Nita at the *atelier*, and therefore he dared not present himself before her now, as he really longed to do. He talked a great deal of the evident sincerity of the passion agitating him, and which, to his real amazement, he found had survived a whole year's absence from the charmer.

Temple said nothing; but there is a

silence which may be construed as far more eloquent than words.

They neither of them made any attempt to see or address Nita that evening.

But on the way home Wylde declared that if on inquiry he found the girl had not forfeited the character for integrity she had borne twelve months ago, he would ask her to become his wife.

"And you, my dear, kind friend, will be my ambassador?" he said to Hugh, stopping to wring his hands in the earnestness of his overwhelming emotion.

"I have been your faithful friend for nearly two years now, and must try to serve you in this as in other matters," Hugh said simply, and felt as he said it that he was slowly pushing a poisoned dagger into his own generous, faithful heart.

* * * *

Hugh Temple, the only son and heir to the parental title and estate, knew that he, for the sake of his honoured parents, dared not marry an uneducated French girl, or introduce such a bride as poor Nita, a painter's model and a singer at *cafés*, to his ancestral home, and to his proud and doting mother.

All this he knew. He also believed that Nita might have learnt to love him; indeed, at the only interview he ever had alone with her, she had confessed a preference for him. Under these circumstances, he felt sure he could soon have induced the young and inexperienced girl to accept his protection and to go abroad with him, leading a happy, though not a virtuous or satisfactory life.

This former project of his had awakened with fresh ardour in his breast to-night, when he saw and heard her, after an absence which had but served to convince him how

profound his affection for the sweet, modest girl had been, and was still.

And now, alas! Wylde realised the same feeling on his own part, and Wylde was free. He had no aristocratic family to consider, for they had cut him off years ago. He had become a true citizen of that borderless land known in all great cities as the artist's chief resort—the glad, gay, irresponsible tract, yclept Bohemia.

What more suitable than that he should marry a wife from among the dwellers in that territory which he had come to consider as his native land?

Hugh Temple spent an anxious sleepless night—a night of bitter mental cross-examination—a night of cruel tests and rigid severity to himself.

He loved Nita, but duty forbade his marrying her; he loved his scapegrace

friend also, and that friend desired to give the unprotected girl his name and the half of such home as he might be able to offer her.

Hugh was honourable, generous, and thorough. The better part of his nature conquered in the struggle of that sleepless anxious night.

He counted the striking hours as they passed so wearily, and when the fifth hour chimed, and the dawn peeped furtively in at his windows, self-abnegation had triumphed, and Hugh Temple had resolved to ignore himself, to do his duty, and to prove himself a true friend, not only to Hector Wylde, but also to the woman they both loved.

There was not much difficulty in getting Nita's address from the proprietor of the *café chantant*, and the very next day

brave Hugh set forth on his errand of mediation.

Nita, who occupied a tiny chamber on a fifth floor in the Rue Racine, was utterly taken aback, when, to her hesitating "Entrez," Hugh Temple—the Adonis of the *atelier*—the man for whose sake she had felt she must flee and hide herself, since she could have denied him nothing—stood before her.

She flushed hotly, and then grew deadly pale—she trembled and hesitated, and answered his kindly inquiries in such sweet innocent trepidation that he felt as if he must take her young slim figure in his arms and kiss away the charming hesitation and embarrassment which rendered her doubly bewitching.

But Hugh had not only a strong sense of honour, but a great power of self-control.

He kept very cool and tranquil himself, and therefore soon reassured her. She listened to all he had to say with delight and attention. He made her tell him all her simple little history, and read the confirmation of her child-like words in the sweet truth of her limpid, ingenuous eyes, and the lovely smile which hovered about her coral lips.

Her story told, he began his.

This was a much more difficult task, for he no sooner mentioned the name of Hector Wylde, than she flushed hotly—not with surprise or pleasure this time, but with burning indignation.

Hugh reasoned with and after a time pacified her—indeed, he spoke to her like a father, and for the moment may have managed to tutor his feelings into the paternal vein.

He pointed out to her the innumerable dangers besetting the path of a pretty girl desirous to earn her living in a wild wicked city like Paris. He dwelt on the peace and security a woman has in her husband's home, and pointed out, with a grim irony of which he was totally unconscious himself, how *he* might continue a friendship with her, were she to marry Hector Wylde, which then would be to her honour as well as his, whereas he now would be doing her an injury in the eyes of her sharp-tongued neighbours and fellow-singers, if he held any sort of communication with her, if he visited her, or walked with her, or ever met her at all, except by chance.

He did not try himself or her still further by declaring the valid reasons which would make a marriage with her impossible

to him, but he urged her, by all the respect he felt sure she had for herself, and which indeed she had amply proved, to try and make up her mind to become the wife of Hector Wylde.

* * * *

Poor Nita! she was truly a simple good girl, and she had from her infancy never heard marriages spoken of as anything beyond an *arrangement*—an affair *de convenance*, as we may fitly translate that word *convenience.*

The dictates of her true woman's heart said "*No*," because she felt she loved the man now pleading for another, but the voice of *reason* and feasibility said "*Yes.*" So amid stifled sobs and many incoherent utterances she managed to say one thing distinctly, "Give me until this time tomorrow to reflect on my answer."

"May Hector come here with me, then, and hear it from your own lips?" asked Hugh faintly, and feeling sick at heart.

"Yes," she said, "but promise me one thing—"

"Whatever you choose to ask," said he.

"This," she replied. "Give me your sacred word of honour as a gentleman that you will remain my good, true, faithful friend, whatever my decision may be in this matter, or whatever may happen to me hereafter, whichever way I may decide."

He swore it.

* * * *

A month after this interview Hector Wylde married poor Nita, and Hugh Temple suddenly found himself compelled to go over to England "on business."

The business was to get away from

Paris, and from the constant sight of Nita's paling face, and her wistful, pathetic eyes.

After six months he returned.

He had managed to raise a considerable sum of money on his "expectations," and some portion of this he devoted to the furnishing of a modest but pretty apartment in the Place Pigale, a neighbourhood much frequented by the well-to-do Parisian artist. There, for the sake of "auld lang syne," as he said, he established Hector and his young wife, and there the baby Hester, Hugh Temple's god-child, was born.

Wylde managed to make a little money by illustrating comic papers and cheap periodicals, and Hugh was ever at hand ready, and only too willing, to help this young and by no means flourishing couple.

Nita, who brightened gloriously after the birth of tiny, large-eyed Hester, began to fade and pale again as her home-life relapsed into its former thriftless, impoverished condition.

Wylde was not cruel to her, but he was not kind either, and the delicate little Provençale blossom, that would have bloomed into a glorious flower if tended and nurtured by constant and loving hands, paled and faded in the careless keeping of her thoughtless, indifferent husband.

Hugh Temple kept his word. He was her good, true, faithful friend to the last, and with her dying breath she implored him to take care of the poor wistful babe whose life had been drawn from the mother's delicate bosom.

So it happened that Hugh Temple felt himself doubly bound to prove a friend

and guardian to the orphan Hester, first bequeathed to him by the woman he had so disinterestedly loved, and afterwards by the friend to whom he had proved himself a friend indeed.

CHAPTER VI.

A RETROSPECT.

"ONCE upon a time," began Vincenzo, having refreshed himself with a glass of punch, as his friend had requested him to do, "to quote the style of ancient story-books, which, after all, is mostly concise, and therefore worthy of imitation; once upon a time a wealthy young Englishman who intended to cultivate his artistic tastes here in Paris, began his studies in the famous *atelier* of Messrs. Rude and Bonnet, where he soon made the acquaintance of other embryo artists, notably of one harum-scarum, but plausible

and entertaining fellow, also an Englishman, but neither a young nor a wealthy one. This was Hector Wylde, the father of Mademoiselle Hester, at that time a girl of twelve. Her mother was dead, and this large-eyed, interesting little lady used to go about to all sorts of places with her father; such doubtful haunts these were that it pained the English friend—in whom you will have recognized Sir Hugh Temple—to see a delicate, motherless little creature frequent them.

"Wylde was poor and in debt, his little daughter was more and more neglected, and Sir Hugh determined, with thorough English eccentricity, to undertake the care of the pretty innocent. I used to see her in those days, both *here* and at the other places to which her father brought her for her meals, which at that time, I

think, were few and very far between. She was certainly a wonderfully pretty creature, and, though scarcely thirteen years of age, had all the *savoir faire* and the coquettish ways of a woman of twenty. Wylde and I used to chum together, and little Hester honoured me with a vast amount of her attention and affection. I mostly called her my little wife, and she repeatedly made me promise to marry her as soon as 'papa' thought her old enough to bear the honourable title of Madame Carlo Vincenzo, a distinction to which the girl looked forward as certain to make her a very happy woman. Thus we all have our delusions, you see—don't we, my dear Jules?"

"I don't fancy you and I have many left now," said Jules, with his usual Mephistophelian "Ha! Ha!" and added, "continue your romantic story. I am beginning to be

interested in this fascinating little devil of thirteen."

"Well," resumed Carlo, "you *would* have been fascinated as I was, and also Sir Hugh. The girl sang charmingly; she recited in a manner that appeared perfectly miraculous, for we, none of us, could understand where she learnt her verses and rhapsodies. But if she was taken to the theatre one evening, she could repeat the play to you the next, assuming all the different characters in a masterly fashion, painting a saucy moustache over her coral lips as she spoke like the lover; smoothing her tangled locks, and veiling her beautiful bold eyes as she whispered the modest platitudes of the delicate *ingénue*. That was indeed a treat!" cried Vincenzo, smiling at the pleasant reminiscence, "and I wish I had been wise enough to marry her as soon as poor Wylde died. I

might then have put her into proper theatrical training, and by this time she would have been earning money enough to keep us both in luxury. However, there's an end to that, for *now* I don't suppose she'd even lift her little finger to help me."

That phosphorus-like glow was in his eyes as he spoke, which always betrayed him if he was moved by any keen, genuine emotion, whether of anger, fear, or tenderness. Taking a draught of the hot punch, and shrugging his shoulders as though he would free himself from the burden of recollection, he presently resumed—

"Temple, having solemnly declared his purpose to undertake the care of this interesting fledgling, went back to London, there to find a suitable home for her, and also to take possession of the estate of Templeton, which he had just inherited on the death of

his father, the late baronet. Finding more to detain him at home than he had anticipated, Sir Hugh remained away very nearly a year.

"Within a week of his return to Paris poor Wylde died, having on his death-bed obtained Sir Hugh's promise to look after Hester, to undertake her proper care and education, and to marry her, should she be willing, when the time came. During the year that Sir Hugh was absent, Hester and I had been constantly thrown together, and I really believe the girl began to consider that she had the same claims on me as the young *modistes* and *demoiselles de comptoir*, who boasted in her hearing of being the *fiancée* of some Jean or Jacques, to whom they intended eventually to bind themselves in the pleasing chains of holy matrimony.

"The girl's infatuation secured me an

ever-ready welcome at her father's board, which, thanks to Sir Hugh's liberality, was now well filled at the hours of *déjeûner* and *dîner*; and besides my meals I used to get pretty smiles and sweet kisses from my self-elected young *fiancée*, to which no man in his senses could have objected. I certainly did not."

CHAPTER VII.

VINCENZO'S CONQUESTS—(*continued.*)

"WITH the death of Wylde and the return of Sir Hugh, a change came o'er the spirits of love's young dream.

"Sir Hugh, who had never shown much predilection for me, and who had once even angrily remonstrated with Hester for calling herself my little wife, now most sternly forbade her to have any sort of intercourse with me, declaring that if we ever corresponded, or if she ever spoke to me again, she would forfeit all claim to his friendship and to the fortune with which he, being a

bachelor and childless, intended ultimately to endow her.

"He gave us this startling piece of information on the evening before he intended to take Hester away to London with him, and he bade us part there and then for ever.

"Poor little Hester, who I suppose had concentrated all her growing girlish romantic affection on me, sobbed and screamed, and kicked and raved, like a passionate little lunatic; declared she would not go with Sir Hugh, and implored me to fulfil my promise to take her away myself to marry her, to let her go on the stage and earn money for us both, for this she felt convinced she could do successfully. And I firmly believe the girl was right."

Vincenzo had been talking eagerly, his cigarette was burnt out, and the heat, his volubility, and the punch together, had

brought great drops of perspiration out upon his brow, which he now fiercely wiped away. After this pause he resumed his narrative more calmly,

"When I found that this was to be our final meeting I determined not to loose my hold on my clever and charming *inamorata*, so on the plea of fetching her a few flowers as a farewell gift I left her; and when I returned presented a bunch of violets to her, around the stems of which I had twisted a sheet of letter-paper, on which I had scribbled a hurried note, making an appointment with her for a private leave-taking that same evening as soon as her tyrannical and inquisitive patron should have left her in the care of the *dame de compagnie*, under whose protection he had placed my poor innocent on the very day of her father's death.

"My loving epistle had the desired effect of course. 'Love will find out the way,' as you know. By what stratagems my love managed to hoodwink or delude her vigilant duenna I neither knew nor cared to inquire. Sufficient for me that as the clock struck ten my innocent dove, wrapped in black lace shawls and veils, trembling a little, but very eager and very responsive to my ardent eloquence, met me at the corner of the Rue Castiglione, and we were soon wandering on, she resting her little hand on my protecting arm, away into the shaded paths of the gardens of the Tuileries, where, unheeded among the many other affectionate couples, we strayed to and fro, now and then resting on a bench by the wayside, but ever talking and plotting, arranging future meetings, and definitely settling our plan of action for the time when Sir Hugh should

have carried my pretty bird off to England, where I was now more than ever resolved not to lose sight of her.

"His influence had already told on Hester to a most surprising extent, for instead of yielding to my suggestions eagerly, as I expected she would, she was now full of scruples and feared that such a course of conduct as I proposed would be deceitful and ungrateful towards her benefactor, and thought that if once she gave him her solemn promise not to see me again she would be bound to keep it, poor soul. I understood her character sufficiently to be quite able to manage any refractory symptoms, and to subdue her at the outset. So I pretended to take all she said quite seriously, told her I understood her scruples, and fully agreed with her, assured her of my desire to help her in the path of

righteousness which she had evidently selected to tread, and declared that the only course left open to me under the circumstances was to bid her farewell there and then *for ever.* At this harsh decision of mine all her excellent resolutions crumbled away, burnt out suddenly by the heat of her passionate affection for me. First of all floods of tears gushed forth, quenching the ardent flames of love and anger, and bringing her back to a more tranquil state as she saw the curious interest her irrepressible sobs were creating in the passers-by. A few frantic declarations of my undying fidelity and my passionate adoration sufficed to make her grateful and reasonable again; and amid warm and repeated kisses and impulsive pressure of her hand and waist, she vowed to attend to all my behests, and to be led by me, and by

me only, until such time as she could free herself from Sir Hugh, when she vowed she would come straight to me and begin the world afresh as my dutiful and affectionate wife. Our talking and planning took up so much time that we heard the clocks strike eleven, at which hour she had given her sacred word to her accomplice (an ancient charwoman or some such ministering angel) to return to the house of the *dame de compagnie*, whom I have previously mentioned. My future course was now agreed upon by us, and Hester left me strong in her love, and faith in herself and me.

"Then she actually quitted Paris with her protector?" asked Jules, laughing.

"Yes! oh, yes," answered Vincenzo, "but everything was most proper, I assure you, and the great regard Sir Hugh showed to her proved, by the care and circumspec-

tion by which he surrounded her, that he intended nothing less honourable than to make a milady of Hester whenever the appropriate time should arrive. Meanwhile he took her and the lady companion to London, and thence transferred my wild untutored little pigeon to a fashionable ladies' school, where she was to have all Bohemianism drummed out of her, and English prudery and starch substituted for the charming attractions of the *ci-devant* actress and elocutionist. With all her fresh studies to fill her brain, Hester kept plenty of thoughts for me, and I was thoroughly conversant with all her surroundings, and with all the good intentions of her generous and assiduous patron, Sir Hugh. About six months had gone by when I one day presented myself at the door of the Misses Tabbyhouse's

establishment, in Hamilton-terrace—one of the finest streets of London, my friend. I took excellent recommendations with me, of course; my terms were the most reasonable, and the effect I produced on the ladies, Hester's governesses, was—*excellent.* I saw that at once. Especially Miss Prudence, the younger Tabbyhouse, a sweet young thing of some fifty summers, was deeply impressed by my interesting appearance and the foreign suavity of my manners.

"I was engaged on the spot as drawing-master to the young ladies, Miss Prudence herself volunteering to join the 'art class' in future. Of course I soon managed to entangle sweet Prudence's virgin affections to such an extent that I became an ever-welcome guest after school hours, and so had unlimited opportunities of watching

over my charming Hester, who, of course, was not suspected of ever having heard of or seen 'Signor Carlo,' as I was now called, before.

"The dear little suspicious kitten gave me and herself some trouble, however, by her absurd jealousy of Miss Prudence Tabbyhouse, who certainly was quite unable to conceal her fast-growing affection for me. At last I was obliged to put our intercourse on a more plausible footing by declaring myself Miss Prudence's faithful and adoring slave, and aspiring to her fair though wrinkled hand.

"This courageous move on my part enabled me to point out the necessity for secrecy and silence, and the practising of a certain caution, which the watchfulness of the schoolgirls rendered imperative.

"So it happened that my position in

the house was more firmly secured than ever, and poor Hester was forced to be constantly on her guard, and, in a fever of jealous anxiety on my account, was all the more ready to fulfil the lightest behest I chose to lay upon her willing shoulders. Oh! *mon cher* Jules, how I could amuse, you if I were to relate the story of my chequered existence in that finishing school of the Misses Tabbyhouse. How the eldest Miss encouraged me platonically, but still showed me plainly that she felt I had made a great mistake in preferring her young and skittish sister (the lady aged 50) to herself, who, though somewhat more mature (she was quite sixty, and inclined to redundancy both of physique and speech), still had a very youthful heart beating in her swelling bosom—a heart that betrayed its feverish

pulsations by the unvarying crimson upon her cheeks and nose. My fond Prudence was decidedly of more æsthetic tendencies, and if I said ascetic I should not be doing her an injustice. She was fair—that is, sallow of skin—and sandy as to her locks, which were also scanty, and her physique was of the attenuated kind, distinctive of the seven years of famine proverbial to Pharaoh's lean kine.

"Well, time went on, the wedding-day was fixed, I was avowedly very poor, and the generous sisters vied with one another in secretly bestowing gifts of money, etc., upon me, each of course most desirous to hide this almsgiving from the other.

"In this praiseworthy modesty I naturally encouraged both the gushing spinsters, and thereby managed to make a very considerable little reserve of pocket money.

"The only real difficulty I had to contend with in these pleasant days was with my rebellious Hester. Whenever she had an interview with Sir Hugh, and that happened once a month, I at once perceived a marked change in her; what she called her conscience and her better feelings gained the mastery then, and she reproached me as well as herself for so grossly deceiving her 'confiding and generous benefactor.' I quote her foolish schoolgirl expressions—pray don't suppose that any such mawkish folly possessed *me*."

"Don't be alarmed, my dear Carlo, I never for a moment did you any such flagrant injustice!" said Verve, and refreshed himself with another pull at the punch-bowl.

"You will understand," continued Vincenzo, "that I had not a very easy time of

it, what with Hester's jealous suspicion as regarded the virgin of fifty, and what with her scruples as to Sir Hugh; still the girl really loved me, and so my power over her was sure to assert itself in the long run.

"I managed to get several interviews with her by hook and by crook, and we spent a good many half-hours walking about the Regent's Park, and discussing all our future plans. I will not try your patience by even alluding to the interminable arguments, the endless pros and cons that arose as the time for her emancipation from school life and her migration to Templeton drew near.

"When she left Hamilton Terrace, I knew that my opportunities for seeing her in future would be very few and far between, and so matured my plans accordingly. My

lessons, and consequently my lover's attentions to the Misses Tabbyhouse, went on without interruption. Miss Prudence, of course, was fully persuaded that I was looking forward with eager impatience to the wedding-day, while Priscilla, the elder, had been already taught by me keenly to sympathise in my secret though fervent affection for *her*—a passion we had both sworn to conceal from Prudence, who went on in her coy and maidenly path of righteousness, firmly believing in her sister's good faith, and in my unswerving fidelity.

"Well, I worked that educational establishment to such good purpose that Priscilla handed me over £200, and Prudence also £200, each one desiring me to order the trousseau, and to take and furnish a villa—the one at Sydenham, the other at Richmond; and this settled, to procure a

special licence, by the aid of which I was to marry either one of them whenever she could escape from Hamilton Terrace without exciting the suspicion of her equally fair and equally frail sister.

"Oh, the gullibility of middle-aged spinsters!

"*You*, my dear Jules, not having the personal qualifications likely to ensure your captivating the fair sex, can very likely not quite understand the power I appear to have over the ladies, but they have evidently, and always, found me *irresistible*."

"No doubt, Carlo," laughed Mephistopheles huskily, but though he laughed loudly he hardly appeared thoroughly to relish the joke which so entirely told against himself.

"I only wonder that you should apparently have failed with the charming

Hester, as your conquests have proved so complete in other quarters," he remarked sardonically.

"That is not quite as astonishing as it may appear to you at first sight, my good Jules. For my part I have no delusion on the subject.

"The old girls caught at me as drowning men catch at a straw, and endowed me with the concentrated affection which, under more favourable circumstances, would have been portioned out among husband, children, and relatives. As for Hester, she was taught by her benefactor from the first to regard me as a spirit of evil rather than good, and being, in spite of her Bohemian training, inclined to the straightforward path through life, found my necessitous shifts and bye-ways to some extent repellent. Hence my warfare with her.

"When she went to Templeton, however, she had never really wavered in her allegiance to me, and at our subsequent meetings I believed I had sufficiently drilled her to compel her to obey all my further behests to her, without any faltering or backsliding.

"On her twenty-third birthday—which was near at hand at the time I am now speaking about—Sir Hugh had promised to hand over £5000 to her in her own right—a fortune he intended to settle upon her should she consent to marry him, or should she select some other husband of whom he could conscientiously approve. She was twenty-two years old now, and had had many offers of marriage, but consistently refused all the suitors Sir Hugh introduced to her. *He*, foolish old man, deluded himself into thinking this was all on *his* account, for it

never entered his poor simple head to suppose that I—Carlo Vincenzo—could still in any sense be influencing the handsome, ambitious, and cultivated heiress, Hester Wylde, whom every one already regarded as the prospective Lady Temple and mistress of Templeton."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WOMAN'S WILL.

"ARE you going to sleep, Jules?" shouted Carlo presently, as his companion, whose head had been drowsily nodding for some time, closed his eyes, and gave vent to a prolonged snore that startled himself into sudden wakefulness.

"Asleep!" he echoed guiltily, and rubbed his eyes as he spoke. "Oh! dear me, no—I'm not by any means asleep! I'm far too anxious to hear where and when that handsome tigress of yours first

snapped her chain, and defrauded you of your £5000."

"You may well say *defrauded*," cried Carlo savagely; "a greater piece of cheating was never accomplished to my ken. This is how it was done: I had had many lengthy and most argumentative meetings with my charmer, and firmly believed that I had at last convinced her of the necessity of leaving Sir Hugh utterly in the dark as to her future intentions, coaxing her always to persuade him into making that money over to her in her own right in a free deed of gift, and not fettering her by any clauses as to her marrying with or without his consent. The girl had gained such an ascendancy over her matured lover that she could have got him to sign his soul away for her sake, if that would have made her happy.

"Meanwhile I had made all my plans to await her twenty-third birthday, and the money once irrevocably hers, to induce her to elope with me. To facilitate her escape I had procured her some widow's garments, and left these in London with a trusty old crone whom she and I had known in Paris. On the morning of the first of August (yesterday) the lawyer was coming to Templeton's, and Hester and Sir Hugh were going to enact that deed-of-gift business with proper witnesses, after which she was to make her escape from the grounds, take the train to London, change her garments there, proceed to Dover at night, and meet me here this evening, I intending to marry her at the Embassy to-morrow. I saw her last on the evening of the 31st of July, all then was satisfactorily arranged between us, as you know.

"It was then that she handed over the small leather-case containing her jewellery to me, thinking justly that it would be safer in my keeping. She had some money also—about one hundred pounds—but this she refused to put into the case, preferring to sew it into the bosom of her dress, and with the wayward obstinacy of an unreasonable woman, she utterly declined to part with any coin, and, indeed, was very indignant, and seemed to become quite suspicious at my persistent demands for the money. The rest you know. I had taken care to ascertain her movements, and found that she left Templeton before the signing of the deed of gift could have been accomplished, and it was then I requested *you* to watch my treacherous bride widow, and to communicate to her that owing to her recklessness our proposed

connection became impossible, and that for the future we must be strangers. Indeed, there is nothing left for me to tell you now, for my letter to Hester must have lead her thoroughly to realise our estranged position, and my only fear now is that with the fire of vengeance flaming in her outraged bosom she may wish to punish me at once, and may set the police on my track. She will have the heartiest co-operation from the Misses Tabbyhouse, who have both vowed to hunt me to the uttermost ends of the earth, and to *see* me branded as—a felon! Poor spinster pussies!"

"Ha! ha!" cried Jules, "you would, indeed, have scant mercy to expect from that outraged sisterhood, and for your sake we will hope that Hester may not be inspired to turn to them for help in her newly-aroused desire for vengeance."

"If Hester had a grain of common sense in her brain, instead of all these Quixotic ideas about duty and gratitude, she could still arrange things very satisfactorily for herself, and perhaps for me too."

"I am at a loss to see which way she can turn. I must say," said Jules, "you have utterly cut the ties that bound you together, and by her flight with the stolen jewel-case she has destroyed any chance of reconciliation with her dupe, the baronet."

"There you make your mistake, Verve. You Frenchmen cannot fathom the depth of English eccentricity; and, if Hester be less a fool than her sudden conversion to the path of virtue would lead me to fear, she could still regain her footing in Sir Hugh's good graces by throwing herself

on his mercy, confessing *all*, and entreating him to forgive her. Can't you fancy the tableau, Jules? It would be worthy of our leading melodramatic actress; and on the stage, as in private life, would bring the curtain down with a storm of applause from the public."

"Not from a French public, *mon cher*," said Jules, "for our nation is far too critical, too keenly alive to the absurdity of any such emotional display as you suggest to encourage its perpetrators on or off the stage. No, my dear Carlo, I will believe many wonderful things of an Englishman, but never that he would pardon having been made a fool of by a girl whom he intended to honour as his wife and the co-bearer of his title. However, in any case your Mdlle. Hester would be too proud to risk putting herself in

such a false position. For my part I don't even believe that she will take a step towards discovering either you or her jewels, and though I have not had your good fortune, or much *experience* as regards the feelings and conduct of *ladies*, still I have a certain instinct which seldom errs; and since I saw that unfortunate Mdlle. Hester's proud pale face, I feel convinced that she is not likely to stoop to curry favour from any one, and least of all from the man who has injured her, as you have done, Vincenzo."

"I can only repeat that I hope your assumptions may prove correct, for both our sakes," replied Carlo impatiently. "And now let us dismiss the subject, for if we have to be in time for the early train to-morrow we had better get some sleep before the small hours."

CHAPTER IX.

HESTER'S RESOLVE.

THE early morning saw these boon companions arriving at the gate of the Lyons Chemin de Fer, and it so happened, by one of those strange coincidences which men designate fate, that Hester Wylde found herself at the same station a few minutes later, and that she also was borne southward by the train which held the man whom yesterday she longed to meet more than any other on the face of the earth, and from whom to-day she was bent on flying, firmly believing now

that she was acomplishing her desire to hide herself from her quondam lover in the farthest corner of the French continent.

It was strange, indeed, that fate had so ordered the ways of these two now most uncongenial souls that, bent on escaping the one from the other, they should be parted by a few carriages only, and that the Lyons mail should be hurrying both onward in the same direction.

With the business that took Vincenzo and his chosen ally, Verve, southwards, we have nothing to do, and as for Hester, she had but one object in view—that was to hide herself, and to make pursuit from any quarter difficult, if not impossible.

It certainly had occurred to her that Sir Hugh, whose faithful devotion she had so cruelly tried, and so wantonly disregarded, might still be trying to find her in order to

heap upon her the reproaches she decidedly merited, or that he perhaps was even desirous, with his wonderful benevolence, to give her a helping hand yet again, by the aid of which she might once more be led back into the paths of virtue and peace. All this seemed possible; but that he *himself* might still be willing to lend her the light of his countenance—indeed, this never occurred to her, though she knew his strength and his unselfish goodness to be so great that she believed he would spare no effort to lead an erring spirit back into the ways of righteousness.

But this very conviction of his wonderful goodness, and what appeared almost quixotic philanthropy, made it the more incumbent on Hester to make his discovery of herself impossible, for how could she, wicked, ungrateful, treacherous as she felt

she had been, bear to meet his keenly scrutinising gaze, bear to listen to his heart-broken reproaches, which would be so much harder to endure than vituperations or tirades of anger? No; that, Hester felt would be overtaxing her mental strength; under such an ordeal she would surely succumb, and therefore it was necessary to guard her retreat jealously for a while, and thus to make it impossible for either Sir Hugh or Vincenzo to discover her.

It was with this idea that Hester now journeyed southwards, intending to "lie by" for a while at Avignon or Arles before she set about carrying out the plans maturing in her fertile brain by which she would gain the money she now coveted, for Hester felt that her peace of mind would be to some extent secured if she could send Sir Hugh a first instalment in payment of the

loan with which she had departed like a hunted thief from the shelter of his hospitable roof.

It was Hester herself who stigmatised her conduct by this harsh expression; and, indeed, she fully felt, realised, and was tormented by the knowledge and extent of her guilt.

CHAPTER X.

THE WOMAN'S WAY.

Six months have elapsed—it is winter now, a bitter cold morning in January—whirlwinds of dust are being raised by a cruel penetrating wind that whirls the grit in maddening eddies up and down the Boulevards, and covers the travellers on feet or wheels with its irritating grey powder.

A small neat brougham, the windows of which are closely fastened, is rolling over the smooth asphalte, and its occupant is so completely covered by the glossy otter rug, which luxuriously combines the charming

qualities of softness and warmth, that it is impossible to declare whether the traveller belongs to the softer or the sterner sex. But as the brougham draws up at the *porte-cochère* of a large grey building in the less fashionable part of the city, all doubt is at an end, for a lady steps forth, and, without waiting to make any inquiries, enters a private door in the building, which opens into a long passage. The lady walks to the end of this corridor until she reaches a ground-glass door on which the words "Monsieur Château (bureau)" are painted in black letters.

"Ah! madame, is it you?" says M. Château, who is seated at a large desk covered with papers, and who seems to be too much occupied to rise as his visitor enters the room, although he has the courtesy to ask her to take a chair.

"Yes, it is I," answers she; "I am always punctual, as you will find when we are better acquainted, and I have come to inquire as to your decision."

"My dear madame," replies M. Château, who is a ruddy-faced fussy man, with a restless eye and a nervous manner; "my dear madame, I must confess that your proposition has taken me utterly by surprise, and that I am even now scarcely prepared to give you a definite reply."

"Not after forty-eight hours' reflection, monsieur?" asks the lady, with a covert smile.

"No," he answers; "but I do not wish to decline your offer absolutely, and so must beg for another twenty-four hours in which to think the matter over."

"I am sorry to say I cannot oblige you, monsieur," says the lady. "My time is too

precious to admit of further delays. I came to you first because I thought you were a man of spirit and enterprise, and that together we might accomplish something worth the doing. I find I am mistaken, and will therefore at once offer my services to M. Dè, whose theatre may, after all, be more suitable for my *débût* than yours.

She rises as she speaks, and M. Château involuntarily glances at the charming outline of her tall and graceful figure, and at the noble carriage of her small and finely-formed head.

"Repeat your extraordinary demand to me once again," he says; "I can scarcely believe that I understood you rightly."

"There shall be no mistake about that," says the lady, smiling again with her lips, but not with her eyes, which she has never unveiled yet, keeping them persistently

covered by their darkly-fringed lashes. "Listen, M. Château; take notes if you like, though that is scarcely necessary, as I have had my proposal drawn up by a solicitor and put on parchment in proper form, ready for our joint signature, should you agree to my terms."

"You are a wonderful woman," remarks M. Château, passing his stumpy fingers nervously through the red stubble that grows upon his round head. "Proceed, if you please, madame."

"This, then, is my proposal, monsieur," she says, in a quick, precise tone, as though she were repeating a well-learned lesson. "That you allow me to take the leading part in the new piece you intend to bring out next month, and for which you have at present found no fitting representative; that you allow me fifty-five pounds

for the two dresses I require, and with which I shall provide myself; that you allow me to cause such advertisements as I think desirable to be posted on all the principal boulevards of the town; and that you guarantee me a salary of twenty pounds a night for six months, or as much longer as the piece runs successfully. That it *shall* be a success I am determined, and I seldom fail if once I have resolved on anything. Now, Monsieur Château, you know my terms, and from those I cannot swerve, even by a hair's breadth. I will give you ten minutes in which to make your decision, and that must be a final one, understand."

She speaks very impressively, and Monsieur Château is fully aware that this woman's will is a strong one, and will eventually daunt any purposes of his—which, if the truth must out, are apt to be of the vacillating order.

She has drawn forth her watch as she speaks, and now holds it at arm's length, in such a position that both he and she can observe its insensibly moving hands.

"It is only fair to tell you that the interval I grant you for consideration is half over," says the lady presently, and M. Château perceives that five minutes have really elapsed. Just as the hand points to the ninth the lady rises.

"Have you decided?" she says. "There are but a few seconds left. As she speaks she unveils her eyes, and meets his glance fully, fearlessly with her own. Her eyes are clear and large and blue, and the dark fringe about them adds to their brilliance. "Which is it to be—yes or no?" asks the lady, her glance still steadily meeting his, which soon quails before her persistent regard.

"Shall I go to M. Dè?" she asks pre-

sently, and makes a step towards the door.

"No; you shall not, you beautiful, captivating *witch!*" he cries, and also advances a step, not towards the door, but towards her. He takes her hand eagerly in both his. "You have a will of iron, I see," he says, "and a wonderful talent and power, and a pair of eyes!—"

"Which we will advertise," she suggests.

This time the smile is in her glance as well as on her lips, and renders her wonderfully beautiful—so Château thinks, gazing upon her spellbound.

* * * *

There is a new sensation in Paris, and all Paris is talking about it. A new advertisement has attracted universal attention, and society is set canvassing and wondering.

During the night placards have been

hoisted on all available walls and fences, and sides of buildings—placards of white paper, out of which two clear blue eyes, with deep black fringes, coldly meet the glance of inquisitive passers-by, and the letter-press invites them to go to the Théâtre Château, and there to see "Madame Will."

"Who and what is Madame *Vill?*" one asks another, all being incapable of construing the English double V, unknown in the Parisian vernacular.

"Go and see," say the placards, and the giddy crowd, ever eager for a new sensation, goes.

The Théâtre Château is literally crowded; not even standing room is to be obtained for love or money.

The fame of a new drama, of which this is to be the first performance, has preceded it by some months. It is a sensational

piece, and the author—a man of fame—had been heard to declare that he considered it his best production, but that he is utterly at a loss to find a fitting representative for the part of his novel heroine among the popular actresses of his acquaintance.

Is it the author, then, who has discovered Madame Will, and is the part of the Englishwoman—the leading character in the drama—to be represented by an artist of that cold, matter-of-fact nation?

If so, the piece *must* be a failure, say the critics, and this premature verdict goes the round of the papers, raising up a storm of indignant protest and vehement contradiction, all of which neither adds to nor detracts from the intrinsic value of the piece, but certainly gives its intended performance the benefit of unlimited publicity.

It is the first night of the performance, and the Théâtre Château is crowded from floor to roof, as has been previously stated. The author is not here; he was called away to the death-bed of his mother in Bordeaux. He knows nothing of this Madame Will, and Monsieur Château, on his sole responsibility, is introducing her to his critical audience.

"He must have some courage, that *entrepreneur*," remarks an English agent, who has come over from London to see this piece, and if it prove suitable, arrange for its production with some theatrical clients of his.

The overture is over, the curtain rises, the stage represents a Parisian *salon*, elegantly furnished, both by the upholsterer and by the "walking ladies," who, on these occasions do duty as ornamental furniture also.

Some introductory small talk follows, and a few hints are given, all preparatory to the appearance of a certain mysterious stranger, who, in the drama, as among the audience, has been much talked about before she puts in an appearance.

Every one knows that strange pause, fraught with a portentous murmur, which precedes the appearance of *the star* of the evening, on any occasion, in any place. In the ball-room it stays the feet of the dancers and the chatter of the wall-flowers, as the acknowledged belle of the day crosses the threshold; at the opera it pervades the audience at the moment in which royalty enters the royal box, or as those entrancing bars are played which every one recognizes as heralding the advent of the prima donna.

Just such a portentous pause precedes the entrance of Madame Will in the part which

it would soon be said she had *created.* Very elegant, wonderfully dressed, calm and graceful in manner and bearing, with downcast eyes and measured tread, Madame Will crosses the saloon, and makes her first appearance before the expectant audience and before the guests invited to receive the "accomplished and mysterious Englishwoman," of whom host and hostess have been saying many laudatory words prior to her first introduction to Parisian society at the reception given in her honour on this occasion.

At first Madame Will's part in the piece is little more than that of the principal "walking lady," but she bears herself with such distinction, and her costume is so superb, that, though she scarcely speaks, all eyes are riveted upon her in their scrutiny and expectation.

She wears an evening dress of pale blue silk, the train of which is profusely embroidered with rich-hued bluettes or cornflowers —a wreath of the same flowers crowns her magnificent hair, which rests in a heavy coil in the nape of her neck. It having been stated in the opening that the lady in whose honour the reception is to be given, is a foreigner—an Englishwoman—the audience is prepared to hear the usual English accent whenever this handsome lady shall open her lips. The general astonishment and admiration is therefore heightened when Madame Will speaks with the pure Parisian accent and intonation which foreigners are said never to acquire. And so, from scene to scene, Madame Will continues to surprise and interest her public; but she has not reached the climax of her triumph yet. That she achieves amid a truly overwhelm-

ing burst of applause during an exciting love scene in which she recognizes in her professed adorer a convicted felon, whom, by some impossible machination of the author, she is supposed previously to have tended as he lay in hospital after an attempted escape from prison.

It is at this point—at the moment in which she recognizes the felon in the fascinating adorer at her feet—that Madame Will for the first time unveils her eyes.

She has stepped forward close to the footlights. He is kneeling before her and turning away his countenance from the audience, his eyes fixed upon her face. She glances at him, recognizes the felon, steps back, and lifts her eyes and her hands in mute horror and amazement.

Is it the liquid fire melting those glorious orbs, their setting of dark lashes heighten-

ing their natural beauty, or is it the fact that this is the culminating scene of the first act? Who shall say? Perhaps it is the combination; but at any rate she has aroused the overwhelming enthusiasm of the audience, which is now fairly carried away by its admiration of this beautiful and strangely-gifted Englishwoman.

She certainly has carried her audience with her, and stormy plaudits announce the fact of her triumph. Flowers are thrown at her feet, and in the wing stands M. Château, more nervous, more perspiring, and certainly far more elated than when last we saw him cogitating, while Madame Will (in whom the reader has of course recognized poor Hester Wylde) was awaiting the manager's decision, watch in hand.

He now meets the *débutante* with his hands cordially outstretched, and congratu-

lates her and himself in no measured terms on the triumph she has just achieved for herself personally, and reflecting some of the light of her glory on him as *entrepreneur*.

CHAPTER XI.

ALPHONSE DUVAL.

HESTER WYLDE once having realized the necessity for the evasion of possible pursuit on the part of either her false love or her true, had at the same time recognized the great importance of going through an apprenticeship that would teach her the unattractive details of the profession for which she felt herself thoroughly fitted by nature and by circumstances.

She had, therefore, after some travelling to and fro, settled herself at Brussels, where for a nominal salary she entered into an

engagement at the theatre, cheerfully undertaking such parts as the leading lady rejected, and by constant attendance and the willing study of any *rôle* that might present itself, she soon overcame the nervousness and awkwardness which must occur to a woman, however confident and self-possessed she may be, when first she appears behind the footlights and sees that moving sea of faces lifted to hers, of which she recognizes none individually, but feels utterly overwhelmed by the living seething aggregate.

At Brussels, in drama, comedy, and tragedy, Madame Will had filled her allotted parts with care and attention, and therefore successfully, for her physique and her elocution were both decidedly in her favour.

And having gone through this prelimi-

nary drill, she was quite fitted for that first appearance in Paris which had last night taken the town by storm, and the following morning brought her an elaborate offer from M. Dè, the rival manager of a theatre producing the same style of piece as at that superintended by M. Château.

The author of the piece in which Madame Will had so greatly distinguished herself, returned to Paris in hot haste, anxious to meet and pay homage to the glorious and gifted stranger who had so successfully embodied his creation in her art.

Monsieur Duval was clever and accomplished—a man of the world. He had in his own person fully discovered the truth of the axiom, that "Nothing succeeds like success." His success had been great, and the flattery and adulation lavished on him, chiefly by the appreciative ladies of the

literary *salons* of Paris, might have turned the head of a younger man, or of one with a less carefully balanced mind. But although M. Duval had but just passed his fortieth year, experience had aged him considerably, and he was altogether too steady to be led astray by the mundane temptations of praise and admiration, which he justly estimated at their shallowest valuation.

Such was the man who now hastened back to Paris inspired by the fast-spreading fame of the appearance of this mysterious Englishwoman, who appeared to have been conjured up from the mystic land of the Great Unknown at the critical moment when a fit representative of his novel heroine was essential to the success of his latest and most ambitious theatrical effort.

Duval's first visit, on his arrival in Paris, was to M. Château, whose delight and triumph anent the wonderful Madame Will knew no bounds, and who was bent on carrying Duval at once to the Rue Taitbout, where Hester had found a modest and economical resting-place, which thoroughly suited her purse and present position. But Duval elected to watch this extraordinary heroine from the "front," first of all, and earnestly impressed the necessity for secrecy as to his return on the over-communicative M. Château.

On this occasion Château's discretion was, however, equal to the task, and as Duval took the precaution to hide himself in the background of a *baignoire,* he escaped recognition from other members of the company, which would have in-

stantly followed his taking his accustomed place in the stalls.

Duval watched the first appearance of Madame Will, and it took his breath away. He was a poet by nature, and had still a considerable leaven of romance left in his otherwise matter-of-fact composition.

To see his ideal, the fond creation of his inmost thoughts, thus embodied before him—to hear *his* words fall from those beautiful lips, with just a *soupçon* of an accent foreign to France—a slight intonation only, and yet enough to lend an additional piquancy to the situation and to her who spoke the words; all this was to the modern Duval what the first breath of life in his perfect Galatea must have been to that famous and gifted sculptor—the Pygmalion of the ancients. Duval looked and listened spell-bound, as this ideal creation of his

brain lived and moved and had her being before his dazed and amazed eyes. He rubbed them repeatedly to make quite sure he was not dreaming, but when she looked up, and his entranced glance plunged into the wondrous depths of her glorious blue eyes, he knew that no dream could have given him so splendid a delusion, and his next impulse was to take himself and his unbounded homage into the presence of this heroine—off the stage.

CHAPTER XII.

ACTRESS AND AUTHOR.

ALPHONSE DUVAL is perfectly aware that to be introduced to Madame Will, whose imposing appearance has filled him with profound respect, he will have to go through as much formality as though he aspired to be presented to a duchess.

He has heard enough from M. Château, and such literary friends as he has met at cafés restaurants, and at the Château itself this very evening, to convince him that Madame Will is a lady whom it is difficult for a stranger to approach, and M. Duval

is quite aware that she will not receive him even on the plea of his authorship, unless he be presented to her in due form.

For an actress, living alone in Paris, to have surrounded herself with so impregnable an atmosphere of isolation, thanks to her virtue and her known self-respect, is indeed a triumph, and Hester appreciates her honoured position keenly.

She has a faint lurking hope in the depth of her heart that the day may yet come when Sir Hugh Temple will learn that the Hester he had so honoured, and who used him so cruelly, was able after all to repent her wickedness, and by a life of unblemished repute, and unflagging perseverance and industry, to gain a position for herself which entitled her to the profound respect of all who knew and came in contact with her.

That Sir Hugh would ever care or be able to acknowledge this triumph to her personally was a thought beyond Hester's wildest aspirations. All she dared hope was that *some day* Sir Hugh would be able to think of her with less bitterness, and would be able to acknowledge, "There was some good in that poor child after all, and she has proved it."

Hester's residence consisted of three rooms *en suite*, and it is to her boudoir or study I would now wish to introduce the reader.

It is two P.M. on the day after Mons. Duval had watched and been so captivated by his living heroine. After the performance was over he had consulted M. Château, and that gentleman had promised to call upon Madame Will as soon as he could hope to be admitted the next day, and to

entreat that lady's permission to present *the author* to her whenever it should suit her to receive him. She appointed two o'clock, and the gilt clock upon the velvet-covered mantel-shelf has just struck the hour when MM. Château and Duval are announced. Duval finds himself in a handsome but by no means showily-furnished apartment.

The long windows are hung with lace curtains, artistically looped up by heavy crimson cords and tassels. The easy lounging chairs are not covered with velvet, according to the true Parisian fashion.

Madame Will has selected a dainty cream-coloured *cretonne* for the purpose, and has ornamented the chairs and couches with crimson tassels that correspond with those on the curtains. She is seated on a low *prie-dieu* chair when the gentlemen are

announced, but now she rises to meet them. She wears a long loose robe cut in the Pompadour style, and made of palest blue cachemire, the folds of which drape and fall about her slim figure with truly admirable elegance.

M. Duval came prepared to be in some degree disenchanted, for he is fully aware of the fictitious beauty lent by the glamour of footlights and all the scenic accessories by which theatrical surroundings give a supernatural attraction to women who, off the stage, appear as very ordinary mortals. He expected that the first view of Madame Will by daylight, and in a conventional room, would dispel the charming delusions with which she had inspired him on the previous evening. It was therefore with more than a delighted astonishment that Duval's incredulous gaze now met the clear

blue eyes so seriously fixed upon him, and with irrepressible admiration he noted the clear transparent skin and the faint bloom of natural colour which came and went so readily on Hester's fair young face. Duval feels instinctively that this is a remarkable woman off as well as on the stage.

This is no conventional, rouge-raddled adventuress—no would-be grand lady who is at heart but a sorry and vulgar woman, learning her acting *rôles* as a parrot does, without power or sympathy to respond to the inspirations of an author. This actress is a lady; she is young, accomplished, beautiful—absolutely alone, perhaps friendless. Duval is a gentleman in the true sense of the word, and he treats this lovely, lonely young lady with all the deference he considers due to her in her unprotected position. Duval in his time has met with many

handsome and attractive women, and they have invariably received him with the flattering cordiality such a man is wont to receive from all womankind, more especially when the relative positions of author and actress secure a certain professional interest which is keener even than personal like or dislike. In this particular instance it is Duval who feels intensely grateful to the actress who has done such ample justice to his creation, and thus the homage of his mind is hers even before she casts the bewildering spell of her beauty and powers of fascination about him.

M. Château, who is a silent spectator of this strange meeting between actress and author, begins to feel some qualms of jealousy within his inflammable bosom as he notes the evident admiration with which Duval is watching the handsome *débutante*

for whose sake Château himself is already enduring all the tortures of unrequited love and maddening jealousy.

As for Duval, the longer he remains in the presence of this fascinating woman the more embarrassed he feels. All his wonted readiness of speech and compliment have deserted him, and he realises with a tightening about the heart that is almost painful, that the woman he now stands face to face with is the first and only one before whom he quails and trembles. This woman is to him the embodiment of fortune. In her he has met his fate, and henceforth she will hold the threads of his destiny in those long shapely fingers of hers—for his glory or his destruction, who shall say?

If this moment were not one of such supreme emotion Duval would have laughed aloud at the madness so suddenly possessing him.

To think that he—the cool cynic whose eyes and senses were supposed to have been rendered proof by a series of Parisian campaigns and disenchantments—that he, Alphonse Duval, should mentally cry "Surrender!" at his first introduction to a young stranger, who, at any other theatre than M. Château's, would certainly not have been entrusted with any more responsible part than that usually undertaken by the conventional *ingénue.* Yes, if the game thus suddenly commenced had not been so awfully serious, Duval might have laughed aloud. As it was, he felt as though he were choking back tears, and with the greatest difficulty found any words at all in which to address Madame Will, who continued her pretty small-talk, and smiled her pretty smiles, dividing her attention between her visitors with the utmost impartiality.

Duval knows that haste or awkwardness on his part will precipitate matters and spoil all his chances of future success with this proud, self-reliant, but thoroughly modest woman. He loves her—that is certain—and all the concentrated passion of his warm nature is kindling as he listens to and watches Hester. Well, at least he is free—no marriage tie binds him, and if he can persuade this glorious woman to become his wife, he will willingly turn his back on all the manifold delights of his prolonged bachelorhood, and devote himself and all his energies to secure the happiness of the only woman to whom he has ever felt the desire to be united in legal bonds—for better for worse—for *all* time to come!

When Duval has a second interview granted him on the following day he is far more at his ease, and Madame Will begins

to feel some personal interest in this very agreeable stranger, and enters eagerly into a warm discussion on the merits and demerits of the piece, and of the heroine, in whose character she has achieved so brilliant a triumph.

Duval's evident delight at her rendering of his Galatea, is a tribute to her powers which gratifies her more than any other form of compliment could do. She is perfectly aware of this man's high position in all the artistic and literary circles for which Paris is universally distinguished. She knows that Duval has made a name and position for himself, which make him the cynosure of thousands of admiring and envious eyes. Therefore she gratefully accepts the homage from the man of letters, which rendered to herself as an artiste is very sweet. But as soon as she discovers that this admiration is

mingled with a personal feeling of attraction towards her as a beautiful woman, a perfect revulsion of emotion besets her and she at once shrinks from any further interviews with Duval, of whom she is beginning to be afraid. As an author she has learnt to revere him; as a man of the world he has grown despicable in her eyes. She deprecates the idea of hearing any declaration of love from him, for she is sure that such a confession as Duval would make to her cannot fail to lead to an open rupture between them, for she has learnt that what men call love to women placed as she now is can only humiliate instead of elevating her in her own eyes. And, after all, we are our own severest critics, and conscience will make us hear and see ourselves in our true crude colours, however anxiously we may seek to tone down and palliate the

too glaring hues of our faults and weaknesses.

Hester certainly had become a very exacting and conscientious taskmistress to herself, and found that in her intercourse with M. Duval she must exert all her fortitude and self-control to maintain that position of moral eminence which with so much difficulty she had already gained for herself.

From the night of her first triumphant success Hester's position as a leading and rising actress was absolutely assured to her, and with her continued fame new offers at higher and higher salaries kept pouring in upon her. All the managers and agents were urging her to better her position, and to increase her salary; but Hester was far too honourable a woman to despise or ignore the trusty ladder by which she had climbed

to and reached *success* to be other than grateful and faithful for that original help and support, which in her case meant Monsieur Château.

He had certainly acted honourably and considerately to her as far as their professional intercourse went, and Hester was determined to serve him in her turn to the best of her ability. That *best* was indeed excellent, and Monsieur Château, as well as Madame Will, were doing a flourishing business just now.

Three months of this new career had elapsed, when Hester resolved to write once again a letter to Sir Hugh Temple, and this was her second letter:—

"My dear Sir Hugh,—Although nearly a year has elapsed since you have received any communication from me, I feel quite

sure that you cannot for one single moment have imagined yourself *forgotten.* I am thankful that I am able to-day to enclose a half-note of £50 to you; the other half shall certainly follow to-morrow. I fervently hope and believe that before the end of the year I shall be enabled to send you £100, and this I feel you will consider as an earnest of my desire to repay you the sum I was forced to borrow from you when I abandoned you, my too generous benefactor, and the peaceful and happy home you, in your extreme goodness, had offered me. You, Sir Hugh, who are so noble, so good, so kind, will *not* rejoice to hear that long ere this you have been thoroughly avenged! Perhaps you will even *pity* me! God bless you for your tender compassion! From the very hour in which you first deemed me

tears of repentance I have striven to wash out the terrible injury I did to you. I only wish it were in my power to prove to you the sincerity of my desire to make some kind of atonement for the grievous wrong that was done to you, and indeed I would leave no stone unturned that could help me to raise some sort of monument to your great goodness, and at the same time mark my mad wicked folly, the whole consequences of which I have only been able to realise by slow and miserable days of brooding and repentance. I feel, alas! that the only kindness I can now show you is never more to trouble you by word, deed, or sight of me; and indeed I will endeavour to spare you from any such infliction, for I promise to do all that lies in my power to shield you from the pain of any interview with me,

a traitor I have been hunted down, pursued by endless humiliation and suffering. Other men would triumph in the misery which followed so speedily on the defeat of their own schemes and desires. You, who are so infinitely superior to all other men, will regret rather than rejoice in the fact that I have borne sorrow and trouble during the last year. You will believe me, too, when I give you my most sacred word that the money I send you I have earned by my own honest exertions. You will not rush to the conclusion that I am utterly lost because I have treated you with ingratitude, the baseness of which still fills me with horror whenever I shudderingly remember the cruel part I was made to act towards you. Believe, dear Sir Hugh, that I have truly expiated my sin towards you, and that with bitter

tears of repentance I have striven to wash out the terrible injury I did to you. I only wish it were in my power to prove to you the sincerity of my desire to make some kind of atonement for the grievous wrong that was done to you, and indeed I would leave no stone unturned that could help me to raise some sort of monument to your great goodness, and at the same time mark my mad wicked folly, the whole consequences of which I have only been able to realise by slow and miserable days of brooding and repentance. I feel, alas! that the only kindness I can now show you is never more to trouble you by word, deed, or sight of me; and indeed I will endeavour to spare you from any such infliction, for I promise to do all that lies in my power to shield you from the pain of any interview with me,

for I will strive to make our meeting most improbable—indeed, impossible. I shall contrive to get this letter posted in London, as I did with the first one I wrote to you, but do not be afraid to visit your old favourite haunts there, for you will certainly not be intruded upon by me. I am *not* living in the metropolis, although aware that that is the safest abode for those who desire to hide themselves from their former friends and acquaintances. From this time forth I will not trouble you with any more letters, but will content myself by sending you instalments of that *forced* loan, which has enabled me to live, to find employment, and to improve my condition. The jewels you gave me in the old, good happy days I grieve to tell you I *cannot* return to you now! They were stolen from me within twenty-

four hours of my leaving my happy home—my peace of mind—and you! It is to you, my honoured benefactor, and to the ever-present remembrance of your true goodness, that I owe my present independence and the thoroughly honourable position I occupy, for I can fearlessly declare to *you* that though wealth has been offered me by men who admired my appearance and cared not a jot for my soul or its well-being, I have invariably spurned such dishonourable proposals, infinitely preferring to maintain myself in the paths of virtue by my own unflagging and honourable exertions. Having succeeded so far, I can really rejoice to-day, for I am able truthfully to subscribe myself your deeply repentant but ever most faithful and grateful—

"HESTER WYLDE."

CHAPTER XIII.

POOR SIR HUGH.

Sir Hugh Temple, a clever and somewhat eccentric but thoroughly honourable man, had determined from the day that he swore to Hester's father on his death-bed to guard and cherish the beautiful and gifted young orphan who was to be left so completely alone in the cruel wide world, to fulfil that promise to the uttermost extent of his power. He had, even before he met with the child Hester, conceived the project of causing some promising orphan—perhaps some distant relative of

his own—to be educated and brought up with a view to her ultimately becoming a fitting helpmate and unconventional but thoroughly devoted wife to him, for he had seen such disastrous consequences result from the usual marriage *à la mode* contracted by persons who moved in the same social sphere as himself, that he had determined on selecting a wife who should in every sense be of his individual choosing, who should have neither money nor fine relations to recommend her, and who should be without the conventional notions and affectations which made the young ladies of the London set in which he moved so repellent, so utterly unsympathetic to him.

It will readily be understood that a fine handsome man of forty, with a splendid country seat and a liberal income;

who was a prospective M.P., and who had neither mother nor sister ruling his household with that despotic sway which makes such heroes so very difficult to approach or subjugate, was considered a most desirable "catch" by matchmaking mothers and their enterprising and touchingly-dutiful daughters. But it was to evade the overtures of this fortune-hunting crew that Sir Hugh had resolved to provide himself with a bride of his own selecting and educating, and in the young and inexperienced orphan, daughter of the chief companion of his much-enjoyed art-student days in Paris, Sir Hugh thought he had discovered the beau-ideal which he desired and had sought after, ready to his hand.

Hester had wonderful talents, was very beautiful, and had a charming and naïve

manner, that captivated the man who was utterly disgusted by the affectations and the conceit of the conventional young ladies whom he met in society. Now that he had Hester to think about, make plans for, and consider, Sir Hugh gave up most of the unsatisfactory worldly acquaintances who always so eagerly welcomed him, and determined by degrees to withdraw himself altogether from such society until he could present Hester as his wife, and, with her at the head of his house, entertain a select circle of such guests as she and he might find most congenial.

Against his own conviction Sir Hugh placed Hester with the Misses Tabbyhouse. He desired for her that she should mix with companions of her own age, and belonging to such families as were esteemed among the set he had frequented as of the best.

Hester could not learn much harm, thought poor trustful Sir Hugh, from associating with girls whose social position was such as he desired to give his wife when she should have arrived at a suitable age to fill it becomingly.

How vain all Sir Hugh's good intentions were, and how utterly futile all his noble plans for Hester's happiness and his own, we have heard at some length from his unknown rival, whose very existence Sir Hugh had forgotten, and whom, indeed, he would never have willingly remembered, since he considered him an adventurer and a *vaurien* from the first day he saw him making love to the guileless child, Hester, and contenting himself with the bread that fell from Mr. Wylde's poor table—too lazy to work, too indifferent to strive for any sort of employment, but quite ready to avail

himself of the scant store of his impoverished neighbours.

This despicable villain, by his peculiarly fascinating appearance and his plausible eloquence, gained such an ascendancy over the child Hester, that his influence might almost be considered as magnetic; and, indeed, it seemed as if he cast a spell over her that rendered her his absolute slave as long as his presence or his letters kept the charm he exercised over her unbroken. How he at length, and with a ruthless hand, himself tore the chain that bound her to him asunder, the reader has already seen. But of all this mysterious and evil influence which was at work to despoil his cherished plans and their treasured object, poor Sir Hugh had not the faintest suspicion.

Then Hester, awakened to a sense of her base ingratitude, in her lover's absence

resolved to carry her miserable deceit no further, and not to sign a contract which she inwardly swore she would never keep, fled from the house which had so kindly sheltered her, and which, by all who knew her, was actually considered as her own.

The blow of her sudden disappearance utterly annihilated poor Sir Hugh, who, besides the interest he naturally took in the object of so much of his thought, care, and devotion, had by degrees become personally and very deeply attached to the beautiful girl who was so soon to become his cherished wife, the confidante of all his thoughts, hopes, and wishes, the fitting helpmate in the hospitalities and charities for which the home and the family at Templeton had so long been famous.

How terrible his grief, his disappointment, and, indeed, his impotent rage were,

as he learnt to realise the truth that he had lost his beautiful darling—his one ewe lamb—will readily be understood.

It was not until he received Hester's letter, written in Paris on the night of her arrival there, that he had the slightest suspicion of the reason of her flight. And even his suspicion was so vague and so vacillating that he may be said to have been more perplexed than enlightened by her letter.

There was but one fact he gleaned from it, and that was in itself sad enough. She was in want, unhappy, and in some special strait, the nature of which Sir Hugh vainly racked his brains to discover. That she had grievously injured him was forgotten when the evidence of her own wretchedness reached him in those disconsolate lines in which she hinted to him that she had been deceived—forsaken.

By whom? Whom had she met? Whom known? Whom seen? She had been so jealously guarded, so constantly watched over, both at the Misses Tabbyhouse's establishment and, since her arrival at Templeton, by the lady companion, Mrs. Leigh —a widow of attractive manners, and possessing many accomplishments, whose time and attention had been devoted exclusively to her handsome and clever pupil and friend, Miss Hester.

How could the girl have eluded all this vigilance? If there was a partner in her flight, who was he? Where could they have met and become acquainted? Whoever he was, one thing was evident from both Hester's letters, he was a villain who had decoyed her away, and who had then ruthlessly abandoned her. But why? If the man, whoever he was, had cared suffi-

ciently for Hester to persuade her to fly with him, what could have induced him so soon to leave her again? And why, oh! why had she not confided all this secret attachment to her true friend, who surely would have assisted her in any way she really desired, and was quite willing to sacrifice himself and his personal wishes for the benefit of the woman whose happiness was the chief desideratum of his life?

Sir Hugh's first horrible conviction, when he discovered Hester's disappearance, was that she was dead—that some accident had befallen her—and he scoured the country himself, pursuing his inquiries with unceasing perseverance. He was filled with joy as he first discovered the fact that she had arrived at the station, and departed thence, evidently in sound health, and perfectly composed in mind and manner.

Hester had taken the London train that left Templeton while Sir Hugh was awaiting the solicitor, and Mrs. Leigh was occupied in her own room with the correspondence which filled up all her leisure hours.

Instead of drawing up the deed of gift for Hester, the solicitor now received full instructions as to her personal appearance, and was told to spare neither time nor money (which, with a solicitor, are synonymous terms where his clients are concerned) in ascertaining the manner of the girl's extraordinary flight, and, if possible, the motive for it.

The solicitor, who was a shrewd man, declared at once that there was a lover at the bottom of all this mystery, and when Sir Hugh showed him the first letter from poor Hester, the solicitor remarked that now he understood the villain's game and Hester's

eccentric conduct. He further very shrewdly declared that the man, whoever he was, who had arranged Hester's flight, and who must have taken her portmanteau and jewel-case away on the day before she left Templeton, had evidently intended to await the signature of the deed of gift, which Hester, aroused to a sense of her wickedness, had evaded.

In all this the lawyer was quite correct.

Vincenzo had carried off Hester's luggage on the evening preceding her flight, and had left the portmanteau at the London station for her, where she fetched it, after changing her light walking costume for the widow's mourning in which we saw her first.

The jewel-case Vincenzo purposed taking on to Paris himself, where he had vowed to meet his bride-elect on her arrival.

Sir Hugh's next step, under the advice of

his solicitor, was to advertise, and thus send such messages to Hester as she could not fail to understand, and to respond to.

Hester, however, did not see the messages, nor would they have influenced her in the least.

But Jules Verve read them both in the *Times* and *Galignani*, and without troubling his amiable co-conspirator in this matter, determined to turn Sir Hugh's anxiety to good account for himself sooner or later.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WOMAN'S REWARD.

MADAME WILL'S triumph, so successfully inaugurated, was followed by one victory after another both on and off the stage.

The beautiful and gifted Englishwoman very soon became "the rage of all the theatrical circles in Paris," and, as all true Parisians are connoisseurs of the theatre and acquainted with its active members, Madame Will's fame was soon canvassed by all the volatile inhabitants of the most volatile of cities, who, in this instance, were exception-

ally constant and steadfast in their allegiance to Madame Will.

That lady's sudden popularity seemed steadily to grow, instead of decreasing. Pieces brought out on the French stage are not wont to have *runs* of *hundreds of nights*, as is the case with such comedies as win the admiration or secure the enjoyment of London audiences.

Indeed, even the comparatively short run of M. Duval's piece, in which Madame Will had made her *débût*, was an unusually long one for a Parisian piece, and kept up her prestige for popularity until the night of its withdrawal. But even then Madame Will's excellent position remained unchallenged, for she now undertook one part after another, assuming every variety of *rôle*, and doing infinite credit to each. She had now become thoroughly accustomed to her new

profession; she gloried in her successes, and spared no trouble or labour to perfect herself in such parts us presented peculiar difficulties to her. Indeed, she rather preferred these, for they necessitated earnest study and unremitting attention, and, therefore, kept her from brooding on the wrong she had done her generous benefactor, whose kind, sad face had most pertinaciously haunted her ever since the day on which she had written him that second letter, to which she herself had made it impossible he should send her any reply. With the inconsequence of a woman, she longed for an answering word with an ever-growing eagerness that seemed like the craving of physical hunger, and left her no peace day or night.

It was the stirring up of the old associations in the writing of that second letter to

Sir Hugh which had brought about this revolution in poor Hester's feelings, and induced the terrible restlessness which now almost unfitted her for the study so necessary to her since each week brought her some fresh part.

But the very *necessity* for constant application and work was a godsend to this earnest and strong-minded woman, whose greatest desire was to expiate the wrong she had once done to a good friend by proving herself incapable of any further wrong-doing in the eyes of God or man. Hester strove with all her might to do *well* now in every sense, and brought her energy—the great power of her strong will—to bear upon the fulfilment of the duties she had lately undertaken.

The picture of noble, honest Sir Hugh was ever before her mind's eye, and her

heart's desire was to act as *he* would approve if he only knew of her doings.

But that, alas! could never be now, and so Hester must content herself with doing right for right's sake, and let the knowledge that she had so done be her only reward.

Meanwhile, M. Duval watched Madame Will with constant and critical attention, and the more he saw of her the more convinced he felt that she was quite the most wonderful and, indeed, the only truly good woman he had ever met with. She worked as earnestly and thoroughly as he himself had done in the bygone days of his almost forgotten apprenticeship to the literary profession, of which he had now become a shining light indeed.

He watched her triumphs, he revelled in her successes, and he beheld, in wondering admiration, that nothing "turned her head."

She was as painstaking, as punctual, as modest, and as thoroughly in earnest at rehearsal, day after day, as though she had but some plodding, second-rate part to play, instead of being overwhelmed with praise, plaudits, and admiration night after night. Hester treated M. Duval with gentle courtesy always, but proved by her demeanour that she utterly deprecated the idea of any love-making on his part, for which every hour he spent in her charming society made him more desirous and eager.

Although desperately enamoured of the beautiful actress, M. Duval, a cautious middle-aged Frenchman and a thorough man of the world, was very wary in all he said, and earnestly strove not to commit himself in any way.

But even a cynical Frenchman may really be carried away by genuine feeling at times,

and so it happened that when M. Duval had spent several weeks in constantly watching Madame Will, and had satisfied himself that she truly led a life "sans peur et sans reproche," he formed a certain very important resolution, and acted upon it.

He called upon Madame Will one morning, and commenced, with all the ceremony, tradition, and etiquette imposed upon a Frenchman on such an occasion, to make a formal proposal of marriage to the beautiful lady who had conquered all his prejudices as regarded the state of matrimony, and who, he felt sure, would render him the happiest of men if only she would condescend to accept him as her very devoted and most humble "serviteur et mari."

Hester Wylde regarded the author of this most un-English offer—to be her *servant* as well as her husband—with a strange smile.

She honestly admired and liked this man, and it seemed hard to lose him now that she really had commenced to believe in him as a true and faithful friend.

Seeing her hesitation he argued with her, and implored her not to answer him hastily on the spur of the moment.

Then, as she resigned herself to listen to all that he might have to say, he waxed very eloquent. In glowing terms he painted to her the glorious career that awaited her if once she were his wife. He himself was at the zenith of his popularity as a dramatic author, and what might she not achieve if he was always at her side, studying with and for her, maturing her talents, and teaching her day after day how to embody the ideal creations of his brain in the most effective manner?

What splendid heroines would receive

life at his hands, and how gloriously would Hester render them under his diligent tuition!

Hester really admired and respected M. Duval, and felt herself much honoured by his proposal, but she had sedulously set herself to the fulfilling of certain tasks, and the foremost among these was the banishing of all thoughts of love or marriage. Those day-dreams of a woman's bliss were buried secretly in that terrible past of hers, in which the tender passion and the idea of matrimony had played such very prominent parts.

"Do, pray, let us continue to be really good friends, and true as we now are, dear Monsieur Duval," Hester pleaded when she had solemnly assured her discomfited suitor that marriage with him was out of the question for her. "Let us prove to the world, you and I," she continued in her most persuasive accents, "that an honest

friendship can exist between two genuine artists like ourselves, who, in our profession, can surely find a scope for all that is most pleasant, elevating, and best, in the intercourse between kindred spirits, even where one happens to be a man and the other only a poor weak woman."

"No, no—it won't do, it cannot be," said Duval, in a tone and with a look of angry impatience.

Hester, cool and undaunted, made a slight movement of dissent with her head, and continued her pleading protestation.

"Listen to me with a little patience, dear M. Duval," she said, "and allow me first of all to assure you that it will give me the greatest possible pleasure to study all the parts you write for me, with the true and earnest desire I possess to do justice and credit to the noble creations of your brain. It would

surely be most pitiable if two persons, endowed with such thorough common-sense as you and I, should not be able to continue faithful and devoted friends to one another, without the intervention of anything so romantic and absurd as lover-like fancies occurring between us. Come now, M. Duval, promise me that we shall remain good friends and true."

Hester was very much in earnest, and hoped she had already convinced her admiring suitor; but a sudden and furious jealousy possessed him at this moment, and with a sudden cry of rage he exclaimed—

"Good friends with you? *Never!* From this day we are bitter, hating enemies, for you have been deceiving me by your circumspection and your assumption of modesty and self-respect. All that was a mask; you won't marry me *because you love another!*"

Hester, painfully aware that love and disappointment had for the moment maddened poor Duval, stifled the angry words of dismissal that rose to her lips, and allowing her keen sense of compassion to move her to kind and consoling speech, she determined to confide her past history and her present aspirations to the genial, sympathetic author, and thus to win his friendship and secure the esteem she felt she had merited from all good men and true.

So, after a moment's hesitation, Hester declared her purpose to her visitor, and, encouraged by the grateful smile which now illumined his handsome face, she proceeded to tell him all the reader already knows regarding her past eventful and troubled history.

Duval listened with rapt attention.

Hester, of course, had carefully abstained from mentioning any names, and when she had concluded, Duval simply said,

"That poor man, Sir ——, deserves, and will yet obtain, his heart's desire, and that is yourself as his wife! And I hope I can prove myself worthy of your confidence and friendship, my dear Madame Will, by heartily wishing for your speedy and happy union with the good man whom your adversity has taught you to appreciate—and love."

M. Château, whose growing admiration for the beautiful actress was augmented by every fresh success she made, had anxiously watched the evident devotion of M. Duval, and felt it was quite time that he should forestall his probable rival by making his proposals to Madame Will, without any further delay.

But M. Château was by no means a poet or endowed in any sense with the keen appreciation of the feelings of others, which may be termed a branch of the higher culture. He was, therefore, quite unable to comprehend the delicate feelings of that *rara avis*—one of nature's thoroughbred ladies; and carried away by his passionate admiration for the handsome actress, M. Château obeyed the impulse of the moment, and spoke to Hester in such fashion as to move her to exceeding indignation. Indeed, he very nearly led to an open rupture of all their professional and hitherto most amicable relations. It was not with a proposal of *matrimony* that M. Château wound up his declaration of love, and the offer of the moiety of his fortune to Madame Will, since, alas! for him, there was a Madame Château existing already—a shrill-voiced termagant, who

would have scratched Madame Will's beautiful face had she known of her red-headed husband's wild infatuation for the owner of those lovely blue eyes, which had quite turned the little man's excitable brain.

M. Château, honestly convinced that he was doing the young actress a very great honour, enumerated and dwelt upon the many wonderful advantages which must accrue to that lady as a natural consequence of a *liaison* with *him*, and would have continued his amatory discourse for several hours perhaps, had not Hester suddenly checked him with an air of such terribly stern indignation, that the unfortunate little man literally quailed before this haughty protesting woman, who, with bitter emphasis, addressed him as "the vilest of men!"

Secretly, Hester could not help feeling intensely amused by the pompous little

man's excessive anxiety and nervousness, which betrayed itself by a constant mopping of his glistening face, and a fidgety movement from one foot to the other in a kind of perpetual bear's dance. But outwardly Hester betrayed none of her mental smiles—indeed, her furious indignation, which was so utterly unexpected by him, seemed to rush upon him with the force of an unexpected avalanche, swamping his protestations, his bumptiousness, and his compliments, with a snowy torrent of grandiloquent scorn.

As soon as M. Château began to recover from the shock, he realized that he had made a most terrible mistake—*vis-à-vis* to his leading lady—and he was now filled with a new and intense anxiety lest she should avenge the *insult* (which he had intended as such an honour!) by breaking her professional engagement with him, and at once offering

her services to his theatrical rival and enemy, M. Dè. But the profound contrition with which discomfited M. Château soon and most humbly pleaded for Madame Will's forgiveness, touched that lady, who had in reality been more amused than angered by her nervous adorer's frantic demonstrations. She could not let him go scathless, however—so she harangued him with considerable emphasis and much oratorical point. Then she agreed to forgive and forget the proposition which he had intended as an honour, and she had interpreted as an insult, and promised to continue her theatrical engagement with him, and thus to give him the chance of proving himself the true and constant friend he now most humbly implored she would permit him to call himself.

It will be seen that Hester had indeed mastered the situation, and that unaided,

poor, and friendless as she had been on her arrival in Paris, she had secured a position by her own undaunted talent and perseverance which most women might have envied, and very few could have despised.

CHAPTER XV.

THE WILL TRIUMPHANT.

THIS was the position of affairs when Hester addressed her second letter to Sir Hugh Temple, who, in a sudden fever of renewed excitement, rushed up to town to see and consult with his solicitor now that this second and scarce hoped-for communication had reached him.

"I had sincerely hoped, for your sake, that you would never have heard from this dangerous lady again, my dear Sir Hugh," was the lawyer's first remark when he had read Hester's letter, and listened to all his client's

anxious comments. Then he continued—"I fear you will be annoyed by my plain speaking, but it is my duty seriously to warn you, now that you have so far freed yourself from this girl's evil influence, to abandon all idea of ever seeking to see her again, or of letting her know that you are still willing—pardon me—still *weak* enough to forgive and to welcome her."

"I am quite ready, quite willing, quite *strong* enough to do all this," said Sir Hugh, with an air of settled determination, which powerfully impressed the lawyer, and silenced his objections. "I will leave no stone unturned," continued Sir Hugh, "to find my poor, weary, and worn sufferer, and once more to prove my affection for her and my desire to serve her."

"If you are bent on finding this woman, Sir Hugh, I will offer no further advice, of

course," said the lawyer coldly; but, perhaps reflecting on the influential position of his client, he added, "It is now my duty to assist you in every way in my power, and I give you my word that I will do so to the best of my ability. The girl Hester is evidently full of regret now for the sinful folly she committed in casting your generosity to the winds, and she may be far more inclined to give us some clue of her whereabouts now than she was a year ago. I thought it would not be long before she got tired of this romantic game of seclusion and independence," the lawyer remarked drily.

"Tell me what step I can take *now*," said Sir Hugh, wholly ignoring the sarcasm of the other's look and words.

"We'll advertise again, and at regular intervals," said the lawyer decisively.

"Say, every third day, both in the *Times* and *Galignani.* I'll concoct the advertisement, and, as the lady is on the *qui vive* now, you will find we shall soon get some result to our 'frantic appeals.'"

* * * *

About a fortnight after the above conversation Jules Verve is sitting in one of the *cafés* on the Boulevard des Italiens, Paris, idly scanning the advertisements in *Galignani*, when he suddenly lights on one that makes him jump up with a start and an oath.

The advertisement reads as follows:—

"To 'H. W.,' who left her home in August last year, and is known to be residing in a large town, where she has found some profitable occupation, an eager welcome is offered if she will grant an interview to the owner of 'T.,' who, not

desirous to coerce her in any way, is only anxious to offer her advice and assistance if she should require either or both. To any one who can give information as to the present residence of 'H. W.,' a reward of £100 is offered, which will be paid on the proof of authenticity being tendered to Arthur Law, solicitor, Gray's Inn Lane, London."

"A hundred pounds will set me up finely," Jules Verve meditates, the cunning light in his black eyes gleaming at the prospect of funds he sorely needs at this moment. "That villain Vincenzo did not choose to divide his plunder fairly with me when we sold the girl's jewels," he continues, in the appropriate Mephistophelian stage whisper. "Now I will be even with him, for I will find this woman, and then I will take a trip to London and make Mr.

Law, or rather Sir Hugh, pay my expenses first-class—ha! ha!"

Fortune is said to favour the brave, but in this instance fortune favoured the cunning, for it (or she—the vagaries of fortune certainly lend her the appearance of being feminine) smiled on our Mephisto, and led him into the Théâtre Château that very evening, where, in the favourite actress, Madame Will, he recognised the "H. W." whom he had that very afternoon resolved to make it the chief business of his life to discover.

Filled with elation, Verve returned to his lodgings, and that same night wrote the following letter to Mr. Law:—

"SIR,—I this day, travelling through Paris, chanced to see your advertisement, and feel sure that I know the lady for whom you advertise, and that I can disclose

her present address to you, though she is most anxious not to reveal her identity. I have seen her within the past week, but she utterly refuses to make herself known to any of her former friends, and you, I presume, are the agent of Sir Hugh Temple who is probably still anxious to meet Hester Wylde again—a lady grievously misled by a villain who has now abandoned her. A letter addressed to 'J. M. V.,' Post Office, Paris, will find me until the end of this week, when I shall continue my journey; and as I think of going to Jersey, I should not object to prolonging the trip to London, and paying you a visit in person, if you will guarantee my expenses—first-class return."

Mr. Law, as in duty bound, telegraphed to Sir Hugh Temple on the receipt of this letter, and the same night found that

gentleman seated in the coffee-room at the Langham Hotel, in anxious consultation with his solicitor.

Sir Hugh's first impulse was to go to Paris at once, and to wait about in the post-office until "J. M. V." should appear and demand a letter for those initials, when Sir Hugh proposed making himself known at once to the mysterious letter-writer, and offering him a £100 note on the spot, in exchange for Hester's address.

This Quixotic exploit on the part of Sir Hugh Mr. Law utterly pooh-poohed, of course—indeed, he had a strong suspicion that "J. M. V."'s letter was only "a plant," or a trap baited by the clever Miss Wylde herself, whom the lawyer thoroughly disliked and distrusted.

"We'll offer 'J. M. V.' £150 cash. That will cover all expenses, and bring him

or her here by this day week. I'll stake my professional reputation on his advent."

Of course the lawyer's advice was ultimately adopted by Sir Hugh, who looked happier and younger by quite ten years since he began to experience some reasonable hope of seeing his beloved and "most unfortunate" Hester once again.

If Sir Hugh ever had any angry or bitter feeling in his heart towards the girl he had learned to love with all the concentrated ardour of a man who has outlived the first wild passions of early youth, his tenderness has certainly obliterated any but the fondest feelings of which he is capable, and he desires only to see Hester and to plead his cause with her now that she seems to have been deserted by the villain who tempted her away from the shelter of the home Sir Hugh still longs to make her own.

"J. M. V." wrote by return of post to accept Mr. Law's offer, and to appoint a day and hour on which he will present himself in Gray's-inn-lane.

Punctual to the very minute he has fixed, Verve enters the lawyer's office, where Sir Hugh, in a ferment of impatience, is awaiting him.

The Mephistophelian appearance of Verve is by no means prepossessing in the eyes of either of his interlocutors, but as in this instance Jules is aware that the telling of straightforward facts is far more likely to prove advantageous to him than any lies his ingenuity might concoct, he resolves to tell Sir Hugh the whole truth as far as he knows it concerning Vincenzo's past intrigues with Hester, and his cowardly desertion of her on her arrival in Paris.

There is but one thing Verve withholds

from Sir Hugh, and that is Hester's present whereabouts and her occupation.

But Sir Hugh is too much moved by his joyful gratitude and enthusiasm to heed his wary lawyer's hints and warnings, and frankly expresses his thanks to Verve and his desire to repay him for the trouble he must have had, with the liberality that is filling Sir Hugh's generous heart to overflowing.

Verve has proved to him that Hester was decoyed, betrayed, deserted, and that she of her own accord withdrew from further deceiving him; he does not even pause to consider that if Vincenzo had kept his word and met her on her arrival in Paris she would have been married to him next day. Verve has assured him that the villain did not meet her, and that though she is beset by admirers now, and has certainly had one

excellent offer of marriage within the last month, she is still as unfettered as on the day when betrayed and deluded she left Templeton.

Verve had made it his business before leaving Paris to ascertain such particulars of Hester's career as enabled him to give these details to Sir Hugh, to whom the fact of his darling's freedom gives unqualified delight.

So abounding, indeed, is the baronet's joy that he again warmly expresses his gratitude to the bearer of the happy news, and utterly ignoring Mr. Law's significant looks and warning cough, the baronet hands to Verve a little roll of crisp bank-notes.

The latter glances at them quickly and greedily, and by that look satisfies himself that he holds the amount of the stipulated

reward, and an additional twenty-pound note which Sir Hugh's grateful liberality had led him to add.

Verve stammered out his thanks in an embarrassed manner, entirely different from his usual glib facility, and made a rapid exit from the office.

He knew that he had not vouchsafed all the knowledge he possessed regarding Hester Wylde, and thought also that when Sir Hugh awoke from the happy dream into which Verve's recital had thrown him, the baronet would be willing to purchase at a high price a knowledge of the whereabouts and surroundings of the girl who held his heart.

The shrewd lawyer had not failed to notice this material omission in Verve's recital, but while he had thought it his duty to his client to apprise him by the

vague medium of sundry nods or shrugs of the shoulders that something was wrong, he did not enter sufficiently into Sir Hugh's enthusiasm to interfere more directly.

In truth Mr. Law was decidedly of opinion that it was better for the baronet's peace of mind and self-respect that he and Hester Wylde should not meet again. The solicitor had, in the pursuit of his profession, seen too much of the shady side of life to have any strong faith in female virtue, and although Hester had voluntarily recouped his client in the sum she had carried away, Mr. Law not the less considered her a very objectionable adventuress.

But, despite these views, the lawyer did not intend that Verve should escape without affording him some information concerning

Hester's occupation and place of sojourn, which he might either subsequently impart to Sir Hugh, or conceal, as events might determine.

Excusing himself to his client, who was still wrapped in a happy reverie, Mr. Law stole rapidly and noiselessly downstairs.

Verve had reached the outer door, and stopped to draw the notes from his pocket. He appeared to have some difficulty in realising the extent of his good fortune. Verve felicitated himself on his reticence during the interview, in which, he thought, lay hopes of fortune and gain; and as he now fluttered the crisp sheets over, and read anew the denomination of each, the mixture of saturnine cunning and gloating greed in his expression rendered his Mephis-

tophelian visage more than usually diabolical.

Engrossed in his pleasant occupation, Verve did not hear Mr. Law's soft step.

He started in alarm, and thrust the notes hastily in his breast pocket as the solicitor laid his hand lightly on his shoulder.

In a few words Mr. Law made known his desire to learn the manner of life and the whereabouts of Hester Wylde.

Verve shrugged his shoulders almost to his ears, and spread out his yellow palms in a curious gesture of deprecation.

"Mais, monsieur," he said, "Sir Hugh Temple required not this of me. No! 'tis not in the bond,' as I think your great Shakespeare somewhere says. If Sir Hugh require it, I can doubtless learn all, and a future interview may be arranged."

"Look you, Mr. Verve," said the lawyer, with decision, "my client desired only to know that Mdlle. Wylde is safe and happy. You have assured him on both points, and with the information thus gained Sir Hugh will be content. All is over between his former ward and himself. Rest assured you have no hope of further profit in that quarter. But, as a matter of curiosity, I should like to know where this girl is. It is a foolish feeling in an old lawyer, doubtless, but it will not be unprofitable to you. Here," and the solicitor's hand dived into his pocket, and emerging, opened, disclosing ten glittering sovereigns reposing in the fat palm, "I don't expect the information without feeing you therefor. If you will impart it, these are yours; if not, rest assured you will get nothing from Sir Hugh."

Verve's keen eyes glanced vulture-like at

the gold. The temptation of present gain was irresistible, and in a few moments the coins had changed hands, and Mr. Law was in possession of the facts relative to Hester which he desired.

He reascended to his office, to find Sir Hugh had just become aware of his own oversight in permitting the Frenchman to depart without affording the very intelligence which Mr. Law had acquired.

So deep, indeed, was Sir Hugh's self-reproval at his oversight in a matter which lay so near to his heart, that the solicitor put him at once in possession of the facts that the celebrated Madame Will, of the Château Theatre, at Paris, whose fame had long since reached England, was none other than the missing Hester Wylde.

The baronet's love and admiration of the high-spirited woman who had so nobly won

her way single-handed to fame, preserving meanwhile her unsullied name, became even more ardent.

He would lose no time in seeking her, in enticing her to return to his, to her home, as its mistress.

Yet, a spasm of doubt wrung his heart. This lovely woman, placed on a pinnacle of success—perhaps intoxicated by popular applause—would she care aught for the sedate, middle-aged guardian?

He would at least dare his fate, and, acting on this resolve, took his departure for Paris next day.

* * * *

There is not much left for me to transcribe here out of the chequered career of Hester Wylde. There is but one more incident I would note for the patient reader's gratification, as he or she will, I hope, be pleased

to find how the woman's will in this case carried the day.

It is on the occasion of Madame Will's benefit at the Château Theatre that we will re-visit the scene of her triumph.

It is just a year since Madame Will made her first appearance in that famous piece of M. Duval's, and he has written the leading part in a new comedy for her now, in which she will appear to-night, to celebrate her benefit and the anniversary of her engagement at the Château.

When first the favourite actress shows herself to the audience on this occasion, her reception is rapturous, the applause deafening; and the bouquets, wreaths, and baskets of flowers that bestrew the stage might have supplied Covent Garden for a week.

The scene of this new piece of Alphonse Duval's is laid in the midst of a very

different *entourage* to that of the magnificent Parisian *salon*, in which Madame Will originally appeared.

To-night she is taking the part of a *sœur de charité*, and very beautiful she looks in the severely simple black and white garb of the sister of mercy. But this garment is not donned until the *third* act.

In the opening scene she appears as a giddy village coquette, and she trifles with and cruelly uses her devoted lover, who, in despair at her heartlessness, rushes off to take an active part in the war at that time raging in Italy. After she has lost her Féodor, she regrets her past folly, repents, and reforms, resolving to adopt the faith and practice of a charitable sisterhood, and going forth with other devoted women to tend the sick and wounded on the battle-field.

After many trials and vicissitudes, the

repentant coquette enters the wretched hovel which, to the unfortunate soldiers, here represents a hospital, and there, of course, discovers her unhappy, faithful, but dangerously wounded Féodor. Rumour has noised abroad that Madame Will's power in this dramatic scene excels all her previous successes; and rumour, in this instance, has certes been specially well informed, for when the *sœur de charité* approaches the pallet on which her dying lover lies her emotion utterly overpowers her. For a moment she stands, awfully pale, and literally speechless.

She has crept stealthily around the back of the bed, and is supposed not to recognise her lover until her eyes are turned towards him, and it is at this moment she faces the audience also.

But no sooner is her glance directed to the front than a look of such intense amaze-

ment comes into her eyes, and her cheeks and lips are so visibly blanched by something she sees, that the audience is moved to frantic enthusiasm by the realistic effect of keen amazement the sight of her wounded soldier has upon this marvellous actress.

Wild shouts and bravos resounded on every side, and appear quite to bewilder and alarm Madame Will, who presses her hands over her face, totters towards the footlights, uncovers her dazed eyes again, looks with breathless anxiety at some one who has attracted her attention among the audience, gives a sudden cry—is it joy, or is it pain?—and falls prone upon the stage in a swoon that is not simulated.

* * * *

There is a moment's awe-struck hush—the audience is still doubtful as to whether this is the perfection of art or the outcry of overwrought nature.

The curtain falls, M. Château steps forward to apologise, and explains that Madame Will has been overcome by the heat, the most generous enthusiasm of her kind friends in front, and the anxiety consequent on a new and arduous part, which she will no doubt resume with her usual health and animation on the following evening.

Nothing is to be done but to go home, which the audience now commences to do, amid considerable grumbling and much wondering ejaculation. But there are a few of the initiated who do not choose to depart without ascertaining the extent of Madame Will's sudden illness, and these inquisitive sight-seers make their way to the stage door, and there loiter to see if Madame Will is sufficiently recovered to walk to her carriage, or whether she will have to be

lifted in. Their curiosity is soon and unexpectedly gratified, for Madame Will presently steps forth, leaning on the arm of a handsome man who has the appearance of a distinguished soldier, and whom the small crowd at once put down for the proud position of "un colonel Anglais." There is some ground for this supposition, for the closely-cropped grey hair and the heavy military moustache this man wears look very soldierlike.

As he leads Madame Will forth he leans towards the beautiful actress whose hand rests so confidingly on his strong arm, with an expression of happy tenderness in his kind grey eyes, which convinces the beholders that a romance of real life is being acted here which surpasses all the thrilling incidents they have just beheld upon the stage.

Perhaps they are right.

Certainly no theatrical performance was ever characterised by more real sentiment than that which filled poor Hester's heart and utterly bewildered her senses when she suddenly met the earnest gaze of Sir Hugh Temple, who was seated in the stalls close to her, and had been steadily watching her every movement throughout the evening with a rapt admiration that was noted by others on the stage long before the principal object of this persistent regard became aware of it.

When Hester finally met Sir Hugh's glance, and recognised him, all the regret, the tenderness, and the longing of the past eventful and unhappy twelve months seemed to rush over her in a perfect avalanche of emotional feeling, and she was conscious of one clearly defined desire only—to fall at

her benefactor's feet, to crave for his pardon, and then to sob out her pain and her sudden joy upon his manly breast. This year of cruel schooling and bitter absence has taught Hester to love and appreciate the noble heart of Sir Hugh Temple, and she feels that she can now requite his faithful affection with all the devotion of which her true woman's heart is capable.

When they have had some quiet and reassuring talk together, they both realise that the love Hester can and does give her benefactor to-day is far worthier of his acceptance than the untried passive fondness which was all she could have offered him in those bygone days of her wild infatuation for cruel, cowardly, phosphor-eyed Carlo.

Sir Hugh knows all this quite as well as Hester can teach it him, and though not

exactly *grateful* for the trials and the adversity which have taught Hester to appreciate and value his honest devotion, still he is quite aware that her heart, after being tried in so fiery a furnace, is all the more likely to beat with a steady and thorough warmth in the home of peace and love to which he hopes ere long to return with his happy and beautiful bride — the woman who has honestly proved her mental strength, her moral endurance, and the power of her will.

Lady Temple now reigns at Templeton— a gracious and charming hostess, dispensing the long-famed hospitality of that house with a kindly courtesy which wins the hearts of her dependants and her guests, and gladdens and regenerates the spirit of Sir Hugh, who is the proudest and the happiest of husbands, and thinks his wife the

most beautiful, the best, and the worthiest of women.

In which dictum the reader, if he knew that lovely and lovable lady, would surely acquiesce.

THE END.

PROUD PEARL'S CAPRICE.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE BALL-ROOM.

THE blaze of countless waxlights, the scented air of sweet flowers and their rival perfumes, the hum of many voices, the fluttering of gauze and silks, the gliding of hundreds of feet, some shod in lacquer and others in daintiest satin; the sparkle of innumerable gems, the more bewildering sparkling of human eyes, the important whispers of sweet lips, the laughter of light hearts—perhaps the heaviest ones laugh the

loudest, who can tell?—and above all this is the moving spirit of the giddily gay scene—music!—Strauss's dance music, bewildering strains, played with so wonderful a power that they seem to force even the most lethargic of men and the most affected of women on to their feet, eager to join the whirling festive throng.

The ball is given by Madame la Comtesse de Monteferrata, and celebrates the twenty-fifth birthday of Victor, her only son, the pride and joy of his widowed mother. Madame is an Englishwoman, who has grand relations and great personal wealth. In her young enthusiastic girlhood she married a noble Spaniard, moved by the eloquence of his melting eyes, his graceful dancing, and, above all, by that charming fashion he had of serenading her, before the windows of the British embassy

at Madrid. Oh! those wonderful moonlit nights when she leant from her balcony and rewarded him with a rose she had worn, and which he pressed so ardently to his lips. But all that happened many years ago; it would have been forgotten now, but those are just the episodes of life that women do not forget. It is over a score of years since the "nobil señor" has been gathered to his ancestors, but madame la comtesse has by no means forgotten his dark eyes and bright smile even now. After her husband's death the countess returned to England to live among her own people, and devoted her days and all her thoughts to her two children. Victor—fair-haired, blue-eyed—is essentially an English-looking lad, the very son of his mother, while Inez seems the gentle counterpart of the handsome dark señor, her father.

"What a charming assembly you have here to-night, madame la comtesse! It gladdens even the eyes of an old soldier, who goes to-morrow to look on very different scenes." So says, with a profound bow of greeting, a venerable-looking Frenchman, one every inch a soldier, from his keen black eyes, and heavy white moustache, down to the extra polish on his square-toed boots.

Are things really looking so serious with you, general?" asks the countess with sympathy.

"Serious, madame? Heavens! but we shall have war—absolute hand-to-hand war, and they shall learn to tremble in Berlin when they know us better. We will teach them. Ah! there goes my noble young friend Victor. Would he were in my regiment. Of such stuff are heroes made."

"Pray, general, do not let him hear you."

"Not for worlds, madame, if it should cause you a moment's anxiety."

"Young men are so enterprising, so enthusiastic," says the fond mother; "they are always eager to rush into danger, and any novelty attracts them. I should not like Victor to be led away by wild emulation in this cause, which to me, I must confess the fact, appears a veritable chimera."

"On that point we will not argue, madame, and as to Monsieur Victor, the mother's fears are surely uncalled for," says the general drily. "The young man seems far too much engrossed at present to give heed to the remarks of any outsider. Well, I don't wonder! his companion is very lovely. Who is she?"

"Oh! a little nobody—my daughter's companion. An orphan we have partly adopted; I knew her poor mother well. She is rather pretty as you say; and dear Victor is so considerate, and thinks it his duty to dance with *all*, as far as possible. Remember he is *host* to-night."

"And a host in himself, Lady Monteferrata," says an influential Englishman, coming up at the moment; on which these three immediately plunge into the great war question again, which at this time is beginning to agitate Europe, and threatens soon to convulse the Continent.

Meanwhile Victor and "the little nobody" have a subject of more vital import to themselves to discuss than general questions concerning empires and dynasties.

"Come into the conservatory, Pearl. I must talk to you away from this maddening, noisy crowd," and as he speaks Victor draws her little hand close within his arm. She leaves it passively, and walks on silently by his side, through a long dimly-lighted corridor, which leads to the farthest entrance of the great glass-house.

CHAPTER II.

IN THE CONSERVATORY.

THE conservatory is very large—it is built along one entire side of the house. It contains magnificent plants of tropical growth. Huge palms and graceful ferns form a verdant and shading screen. Entering at the last door, Victor feels secure from the prying eyes of visitors. He places Pearl in a low rustic seat, and stands before her in silent contemplation.

"I thought you wished to talk to me, monsieur le comte?" she says presently, and as she speaks she lifts her clear grey eyes steadily to his.

"Has it ever happened that I do not want to talk to you? Oh! why have you so utterly withdrawn yourself from me of late, Pearl? I scarcely ever see you at all, and never alone. You avoid me as though you hate me—*you*, Pearl—who are my very life! How I have longed, hoped, prayed for to-night! I could scarcely await its coming. But I thank God I have had my reward. I have held you in my arms, and we have danced together; you the loveliest of women, and I the happiest, the very happiest of men." He pauses for a moment. She is no longer looking up at him, and sits motionless.

He catches at her hand and presses it fervently; she meets his eyes again, and a faint smile comes to her lips. In truth she is a very lovely woman. Her hair is of that wonderful chestnut colour in the waves

of which golden light seems to play at hide-and-seek; her clear grey eyes are shadowed by dark lashes, the firm chin is cleft by a delicious dimple, and it was for the tinting of her wondrous skin that her romantic mother called her "Pearl."

"Dearest," says Victor, with renewed tenderness, "do my eyes betray me? does my voice move you? does not my heart speak to yours of its passionate adoration? Pearl—you Pearl beyond price—I have done your bidding, I have waited in silence for a whole year! To-day I have attained my majority. I am my own master, I know no will but my own, and I get possession of a fortune that even *you* might deign to accept. And all this—will—fortune—absolute command of myself and all that ever may be mine, I lay at your feet. Will you bless me? Pearl,

will you be my wife?" As he speaks his passion overpowers him. He says no further words, but throws himself a suppliant upon the ground at her feet.

She is strangely quiet, and hesitates a long minute before she answers him. Of all her charms, perhaps the greatest is Pearl's voice. In its low musical tones she now speaks to her lover, and he hears her to the end; but as he listens he is thrilled by a measureless pleasure and by a measureless pain. He himself scarcely knows which emotion is keenest.

"Monsieur le comte, she says, "believe me I value truly the great honour you are doing me, and more still the true love which, as you now have proved, lives in your heart for me. I have learnt it well ere this. You have indeed bravely kept your word. For a whole long year you

have been silent on this subject, on which just twelve months ago you first spoke to me. And now you come to repeat your question, and, not having changed your mind, expect an answer. You are rich, handsome, noble. You can hold up your head with the highest in the land, and you come to me who have nothing—am nobody—a poor dependant, living on your mother's charity, befriended by your gentle sister—*you come to me*, and ask me to be your wife! Oh! if only you were poor. If we might work and live together! If you were an artist like my poor dead father, who struggled so hard—and to whom a wife was as a right hand—a help and a blessing!—how I could glory in helping you, in watching you rise, as rise you surely would, ay, and assert yourself, your own true noble self, among men. I am

very proud, Victor! Is that a fault? Think how proud I should be of you, and of your success! *Now* you have no need to work, no desire to distinguish yourself. Your father's title and your mother's wealth make you an object of admiration and envy to your little world. Such a little world after all! Your whole life has been one of indulgence, flattery has surrounded you. There has never been need for you to lift your little finger, or to endeavour to be useful to yourself or others. I like you much, Victor, but I can never marry you. I am no fitting wife for the Comte de Monteferrata. I must look up to my life's lord with veneration, and he must have won something for himself and by his own merits, something no money can buy. Then I could sit at his feet in absolute content, admire, worship, and obey my

hero!" She rises and with a gentle movement withdraws the hem of her dress, on which he is kneeling. He has scarcely realised all she has said, but he feels she is going, going from him, who, alas! has no laurel crown to lay at the feet of this proud, ambitious, lovely, lovable woman. He also starts up now and seizes her arms almost roughly.

"You mean to leave me, Pearl—is this to be our farewell?"

"It is best to part at once, and it must be for all time. I cannot marry the Comte de Monteferrata."

"Because to his mother and his father alone he owes his position?" he cries.

"You have said!" she answers quietly.

"There is no other shadow dividing us? There is not graven in that deep heart of yours the picture, the thought even, of any other man?"

"Great heaven, no!"

"If I—for you—unaided—alone—can win honour and renown—prove myself a man among men, fight my way upwards if I can—*thus* win distinction for you, will you deem me worthy? Will you then be my wife?"

"I will."

"You promise faithfully, on your honour?"

"I swear it" . . . . she pauses for a moment, then flings her arms about his neck and looks into his eyes. "I swear it, Victor, by the love that in my heart of hearts I gave to you, even before you asked it." And she lifts her head and seals her bond with a kiss upon his lips.

CHAPTER III.

IN THE COUNTESS'S BOUDOIR.

THERE is terrible trouble and confusion in the house of madame la comtesse the morning after the ball. Victor has gone. He has fled from his house in the early dawn, and has left only a few lines addressed to his mother. The note runs thus: "Mother, forgive me. I dared not speak to you before I left, for you would have bid me stay! Pray do not seek me; it is my earnest wish not to be found, and I shall take every precaution against discovery. My resolve is to quit the life of luxury and

idleness I have hitherto led. I feel that my better self is getting ignobly lost. I must work—must learn to assert myself. Thus and thus only can I honour the woman who has promised (when such success is achieved!) to be my wife. I have long loved Pearl Turquand, and all my hopes of happiness centre in her. When I am gone, dear mother, love her for me; this I pray of both you and of Inez—dear gentle sister Inez. You have both reason to be proud of my Pearl. For she will give you cause to be proud of your son, as it is she who has raised the spirit of emulation within me; and I mean to prove myself worthy of the love of the three best women in the world, whom I leave under this roof to-night."

Roused to unknown fury by the passion of motherly love and despair, by wild anger against Pearl, and wilder fears for her first-

born, madame la comtesse summons "Miss Turquand." "You have lived with my daughter and been her constant companion, Pearl," says the comtesse, striving hard to speak calmly, considerately. "I believe, I hope I have never failed in my duty towards you, the pleasant duty of a hostess towards an honoured guest. Is that so?"

Gravely sweet Pearl bows her head. Her heart is heavy within her, and her cheeks, her very lips, are pale; but her voice does not tremble as she replies:—

"No lady could have treated a trusted friend with more uniform courtesy and kindness, madame, than you have invariably shown to me. Believe me I am deeply grateful."

Her humble tones, her downcast looks, exasperate the comtesse, and arouse a feeling of burning anger in her maternal bosom.

Her usually pale face flushes hotly as she cries—"And do you dare to speak to me of trust and gratitude, wretched, miserable girl—you, who have broken my heart? You, who have stolen my beautiful boy from me? You, who have crept with your sly looks and your sly words into his lower nature and made yourself mistress there? That is the empire you have obtained. Truly a cause for pride!! Do not dare to answer me! I thought I could bring myself to speak quietly to you—*to you.* But nature will assert herself—*the mother's nature*—and you shall be punished. I will punish you, and you shall suffer—if you can suffer! To think that I, his most unhappy mother, should stand here to be defied by you—you pale-faced girl—by you, who have robbed me of my son—my joy—my pride. Where has he gone? Where have you bid him

go? You know his secret—he has trusted it to you, for you have driven him away, while I, his mother, am left desolate, in utter ignorance of what has become of my son. Oh! it is hard—too hard."

"Indeed, madame, I know nothing, truly nothing. Your son honoured me too much. He sought to make me his wife, and I, intensely proud of him, for him, besought him to distinguish himself, to win a name to——"

"Enough! cruel, cruel girl. Perhaps you cannot realise the awful thing you have done. You have ruined my peace of mind; you have robbed me of my joy, my hope and pride, for you have sent him to his death!"

"God forbid!" cried the girl, and a gleam of terror dilated her eyes.

"Pearl, you must have some pity, some feeling for me. Oh! tell me where he has

gone! Let me go after him, kneel to him, pray him to come back, even as I now implore you;—*I implore you!!* If you have given him your promise to keep his intentions secret, break that promise, break it for his mother's sake. Pearl, let us go together to pray him come back." Her haughty spirit was quelled, and the wretched mother, forgetful of all but her love and her fears for her boy, actually knelt a suppliant at the feet of trembling Pearl.

"I give you my true word I know nothing, absolutely nothing of your son's movements," says Pearl in utter consternation. "We parted last night without his saying one word to me beyond his expressed intention of earning distinction for himself. He vowed he would win a name apart from his title, and prove his manhood among

men. Those were his words! How he has gone, or where, I cannot tell you, for I do not know."

"Then you defy me and refuse me, is that so?" cries the comtesse fiercely.

"Indeed, madame, I do neither."

"Shall I tell *you* where you have driven him? He had been talking to you during that lengthened absence from the ball-room. He was pale and flurried on his return. I saw it. Ah! me, how little I guessed the truth! Then he entered into an animated discussion with my old friend the general, who left immediately after. Victor conveyed to me the general's parting words, and told me that the valiant old soldier intended starting for Paris at daybreak. Thither, no doubt, in some ignoble disguise, Victor has followed also."

"Ignoble? impossible," says Pearl,

raising her head for the first time during this painful interview. "Do you really believe this, madame?"

"I am convinced of it," says the comtesse, "and this is your doing. Now, I think it will scarcely be necessary for me to point out to you, after what has occurred, that my roof can shelter you no longer, Pearl Turquand. I hope, I pray, I shall never have to look upon your face again."

"I will leave you this day, madame."

"Yes, go, now, at once, it is the least you can do."

Pearl makes an attempt to touch the comtesse's hand, which is hastily withdrawn. Then poor Pearl, with bent head and tear-filled eyes, makes her way to the door. On the threshold Inez meets her.

"You will not leave *me*, Pearl? You will not forsake me also? Victor loves

you! I love you both dearly. Let us wait for him together. Be my sister still, as you have ever been, and when Victor returns he will draw the loving tie between us closer still." So speaks Inez, and laying her hands caressingly on the shoulders of Pearl seeks to detain her.

"Inez, my daughter," cries the comtesse, "I have bidden the false girl go. Do not attempt to detain her. She and I can breathe the same air no longer." With a stifled cry, the comtesse sinks back in her chair, half closing her eyes. Inez flies to her mother in tender compassion. Pearl goes from the room, and a little time after from the house.

CHAPTER IV.

BEFORE PARIS.

It is midnight. Such a night! The ground frozen hard as iron, every sound, every movement, reverberating with a metal clang through the cold stillness. The sky has been showing a brooding ominous blackness for hours past. If only that threatening snow would begin to fall! Any change must be for the better; any downcoming, any drops, be they of hail or snow, must bring less cruel bitterness into that cutting, biting air.

Outside the walls of Paris, the brave "Garde Nationale" is on the watch. Here and there camp fires are crackling and blazing, and attracting as closely as possible to their welcome warmth such of the men as dare leave their appointed beat. Those soldiers who have been on outpost duty for the last twelve hours, keeping incessant and wearisome watch, have now stretched themselves wearily enough on the bosom of mother earth. She is a cold, unnatural mother to-night, and gives but scant welcome to her overwrought children.

To a stranger there is something appalling in the great boom of the iron messengers that send startling reminders of their hideous power through the silent night. But to those watchers without the gates, the horrid sounds have become familiar by perpetual repetition, and Monts Valérien and Bicêtre

may send forth their deadly minute messages of massacre unheeded. . . . .

Neither the boom of the guns nor the heavy breathing of his wearied companions, who are lying asleep in the cold without tent or other shelter, appear to disturb the meditations of a young sentinel, who steadily continues to step to and fro on his limited beat. His heavy grey coat is closely buttoned up to the chin, his small kepi is pressed well down over his forehead, but his fair hair, curly in spite of its close clipping, peeps out underneath. No head-gear could possibly hide or disguise the straight outline of profile, or the clear gaze of those blue eyes, which had been to that young soldier's mother the most welcome and beautiful sight in the world—the sight for which she is now longing and praying—how wearily!

It was thus Pearl's lover had determined to "distinguish" himself. Here, he believed, was a chance of winning, unknown and without the influence of high-born relations, that laurel crown which he had resolved to earn, to take home and lay at the feet of the proud woman whom he loved! To-morrow will be his first chance. To-morrow he goes into action, to-morrow he will strike his first blow. Fired by Pearl's ambitious words, and by the answering throb in his own breast, he will rush into the thick of the battle—dare greatest danger joyfully, likely thus to secure greatest success—and all for the sake of Pearl—proud Pearl! Oh! she shall have cause to be proud of *him* yet! He holds her plighted word, and she with her own sweet lips has told him how she loved him—long ago—and she gave him her promise, and

sealed it too with a kiss!—a soft, lingering, intoxicating, bewildering kiss . . . . Even now his heart beats wildly at the delicious recollection, and the remembrance sends the blood tingling hotly through every vein. Present cold, privation, most uncongenial companionship, all are forgotten for the time being, and Victor in imagination is once again in that shady nook behind the great fern screen in the conservatory. Close to his heart he holds the one woman he adores beyond her kind, he feels her kisses—Pearl's kisses—for whose caprice he has now proved himself willing to risk his very life. And fervently he prays, "God bless and keep my darling, and let me come home to her victorious!"

And in her chamber, far away over the sea, his mother on her knees is also praying: "God bless and keep my darling, and let him come back to me soon and safe."

She little guesses, poor mother, where her curly-headed darling is at that moment; still less does she dream of the spirit of joyful enterprise with which he intends to rush into the heat of battle to-morrow—risking his precious life, to do honour, or, rather, to satisfy the ambition of the woman he loves.

CHAPTER V.

AFTER THE BATTLE.

THE heat of the fray is over. Under D'Aurelle des Paladines an important sally was made, and so fierce an attack on the Prussians that it not only temporarily disconcerted their leaders, but spread alarm among the beleaguering troops. Night is creeping on, apparently willing to do her gentle share towards shrouding in darkness the horrid sights that the garish sun and the crisply glittering snow have made too awfully apparent during the past ten hours.

For the time being truce is proclaimed—after a fashion. The great forts have not ceased sending out their greeting of destruction, nor is there any relaxation in the preparation for further raids on the morrow. But that wild combat to which Victor had looked forward with such a spirit of ambitious enterprise has ceased. It has ended with the light of day, and how sad a day has it been for some of the bravest and best! Victor had rushed wildly into the thickest of the *mêlée;* he had steeled his heart with the bright thought of Pearl's steady grey eyes, and wished for nothing so much as the chance of proving himself undaunted. The ambitious intention was genuine and grand, but the carrying it out rash and reckless, and its results by no means such as the young hero had hoped for—nay, reckoned on. In lieu of the first step towards promo-

tion, his career has received a fatal blow at the very outset; for he now lies sick to death, faint and almost unconscious, with a deep home-thrust from a vengeful sabre in his breast. . . .

At last the heavy rumble of the cross-protected ambulance smites on the ears of the wounded, who lie so wearily listening—listening. So they have lain for hours in the enforced lethargy of agonising pain, numbed, crushed, unable to move—dying of cold, or maddened to fever, and suffering from its accompanying parching thirst.

Poor Victor is beyond the hearing of any promise of relief, when suddenly there comes upon him the feeling of a horrible wrench, as strong arms lift him. Then he feels himself cruelly jolted, every bruised muscle shaken, every nerve in his body terribly strained. Finally he loses con-

sciousness as to feeling ill or well; in a deathlike trance he lies oblivious of all surroundings. Such a swoon truly is the greatest boon mother nature can bestow on worn-out, suffering humanity.

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE WARD.

How grateful is the hush, the absolute repose, that comes to those weary soldiers, when at last they find themselves laid at rest in the neat beds provided for them by kindly Samaritans in the temporary hospital for the wounded and the dying. Gentle women watch over the helpless ones with unremitting patience and care; with hushed voice and quiet tread they go from one couch to another, offering comfort for the body and solace to the mind of the wounded and the dying.

Victor lies at rest in one of the softest beds of the ward, set apart for dangerous patients, that is, for those whose lives are at stake. And this ward is established within the precincts of an ancient royal residence, and on its floor dainty satin slippers and handsome buckled shoes have danced many a stately minuet. That deadly sickness is on poor Victor still, but he is no longer faint, though he lies absolutely motionless. He now hears and heeds the various sounds about him, even as with weary eyes he notes those who pass to and fro, and sees vaguely the outlines of other sufferers as they lie stretched on their beds of pain, to the right and the left of him, and away against the further windows.

Thus Victor watches listlessly enough with half-closed lids, and presently remarks, leaning over the bed opposite to his, the

graceful outline of a woman's form, that in spite of the strange Sister of Mercy garb seems to him—homelike—familiar. He looks at the nurse with growing interest. If she would but turn her head! With growing attention he opens his eyes fully now. Oh, that he could really see that face! Set on such shoulders it surely must be fair! Could he raise his head just a little? He tries to do so, but, alas! the mere attempt has made him groan in a sudden spasm of agony. His cry of pain at once attracts the nurse; she turns swiftly and runs to his side. Their eyes meet, and into his comes a look of tenderness and of intense longing as he sees the love of his life once again and whispers "Pearl."

But her outstretched hands fall by her side helpless, as she stifles the shriek that she can scarce repress.

What faint colour there was in her fair face leaves it now, and she looks as ghastly as he who lies before her, her hero, her betrothed, the true love of her proud young heart.

Oh! how low has that pride laid him!

With all the strength that is in her, and it is great, she conquers her trembling, overwhelming agitation, and sinks quietly on to her knees by Victor's side. She takes his weak hand in hers, and covers it with passionate kisses; she prays with all fervour to the Father in heaven to spare the life of this bravest and best-loved of his creatures. Then comes a sudden thought that prompts her to quick action. Help, immediate help! Victor needs the best care and instant attention. Good advice she *can* procure for him, and this shall be done instantly!

So Pearl goes swiftly to seek the doctor

in whom she has most faith, and who has already proved himself a kind and patient friend to all who suffer, and to her who tends them. The doctor comes. He has seen Victor before, and knows well that his is a hopeless case. The kindly doctor meets the eyes of the young nurse with a wistful sadness that says more than words. This nurse has always shown an earnest devotion to the good cause, and has been unremitting in her care and attention to all the sufferers. But now there is more than ordinary anxiety in the poor girl's manner as she learns the fate of the handsome young soldier lying sick unto death before her. It is a keen feeling of personal agony that blanches poor Pearl's face, and sends that look of desperate entreaty into her eyes. . . .

"Oh! save him, save him, doctor, for his poor mother's sake!" she cries with up-

lifted hands, while tears course freely over her cheeks.

"Is it really too late? Cannot you send for her, my poor mother, my dear mother?" asks Victor feebly.

There is no answer. And the invalid fully understands the import of this ominous silence.

"Ah!" he presently says with a long-drawn sigh. "Then it is too late, all too late, I feel it now. Kiss me, my beautiful love. I wished to live for you, and now I am dying—dying for you."

"My glorious hero!" cries Pearl, the ring of passionate despair trembling in her sweet voice, "do not say it, do not think it. Live, Victor! you *must* live, you *shall* live, for your mother's sake, for poor Inez, for your own heartbroken, miserable Pearl."

"Ay, and I will," he cries, and with a

superhuman effort raises himself and lifts the arm that is not maimed and puts it up to her neck. With a sudden revulsion from agony to hope, she folds him close to her warm throbbing bosom, and kisses his hair, his brow, his lips, passionately, as though she would fill him with the vigorous current of her warm life's blood.

"My darling," she cries, "oh! say it again! You will live, live to forgive me, to bless your poor mother, live to be mine —mine."

"I will live to bless you, my beautiful Pearl, but as to forgiving you, sweetheart, what can there be to forgive? I have loved you, I love you now, and shall—and shall——"

The words come slowly, brokenly. His life's blood and breath are both failing him.

"Pearl," he whispers, "my darling, kiss

me." Then more faintly still, "My proud love—my beautiful love—and shall—for ever. . . ."

His hand holds hers closely, and his head falls heavily on her bosom.

Pearl's pride, her hero, and her hope in life—are dead.

VIOLET AND HER LOVERS.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE VALLEY.

Dear little Violet! They must have known the colour of her eyes before they chose her name. Poor little Violet! Her mother had died years before we knew her; then there came a stepmother, one of the old-fashioned stepmothers, strict and exacting, caring much for her own sons, and little for the lonely daughter of her new home. Second mammas, in these days, if we are to believe modern fiction, exceed in love and tenderness all

other women; but Mrs. Ashley belonged to an earlier part of this world's history. She had no soft place in her heart for that tender, violet-eyed, motherless child; perhaps even a twinge of jealousy because Mr. Ashley loved her so well.

Mr. Ashley, in time, learned to repress his feelings, knowing that, if noted, they only brought trouble upon his darling. He was naturally of a reserved, peace-loving disposition, and eventually schooled himself into perfect quiescence. Thus there arose a barrier between him and his lone child, too. All this ended by her throwing her little foolish love-burdened heart at the feet of a certain penniless young German, who gave daily lessons to her stepbrothers and herself. Mr. Otto behaved honourably; he liked the child well enough, and he found out her queer little secret one day quite by chance.

She had written no end of poems about it and him. Instead of taking advantage of his discovery, Otto imparted it to her father. Then Mr. Ashley came to us for help.

Will and I had a private consultation; then I drove over to Harley Street, and brought Violet away to our cosy home. She was a sweet little soul, but half frightened and quite at a loss in her new surroundings. I had seen her now and then, but knew nothing of her; my visits to Harley Street were of the most formal. Friendship there was only between the gentlemen of the families. Will and Mr. Ashley had been schoolfellows once upon a time. Violet sat in the phaeton beside me, very grave and silent.

"Do you like driving?" I asked, whipping my ponies well together. We were out on the high-road now, speeding homewards.

"Yes, thank you, I like it very much," she said demurely.

"This sort of talk won't do," I thought; "we must come to a better understanding, in some way. I must win her confidence: after that we shall get on." So I turned and looked into her pretty face.

"Violet!" I said, "have you ever thought anything at all about me?"

"Yes—often, because I liked you."

"That was kind. If you thought about me, and like me, did you ever pity me?"

"Pity you, Mrs. Bell! No, certainly not. Why ever should I?"

She was puzzled and somewhat interested. I did not answer, and presently she spoke her thoughts aloud.

"You have carriages and horses, and a beautiful house, and you can do just whatever you like, and—and—you have a hus-

band who is good to you, and whom you love—why ever should I pity you?"

"You seem quite sure about my loving my husband."

"Of course you do—any one can see that; besides, he is so nice, you know, you couldn't help it."

The little maid was getting quite cheerful now, and spoke in a chirpy, pert way that I thought delightful.

"Well," I said, "that being settled between us, and granting all your ideas of my possessions to be correct, I think you would pity me if you knew how I have wished for something for years and years, and it has been denied to me."

Voilet said "Oh!" and she made her eyes and her little mouth quite round to suit the letter and the astonishment it conveyed. We were crossing the bridge now,

and one of the ponies was troublesome, so a little time went by before I asked—

"Do you know what I have wanted so long, my dear?"

"I think so. Some one to call you mamma, and to be your own, own, own pet, and Mr. Bell's, too. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes. Now you know my trouble. I know yours, too, Violet, and am sorry for you, and I think we can do one another good. That is why I asked you to come and stay with me. Do you know what we are going to do together?"

"To read, and work, and drive, do you mean?"

"Something nicer than that. To travel."

"Oh, Mrs. Bell! and am I to go too?"

"Yes, indeed. You are going to be our great pet, I can see, and shall do anything

and everything you like. This day week we are going abroad together; your papa knows all about it, and is quite willing."

That day week, accordingly, saw us leave London; and after a glimpse at Paris, very hot and dusty, but not the less amazing to our little *protégée*, we went on to Spa. It was very early, long before the Spa season, when we first arrived; but we purposed spending three or four months there, and found June sunshine sweet and pleasant. Nor was there any heat to complain of in the long midsummer days that we spent in the woods there abounding.

What a sweet little nest is that Spa! What delightful walks, and rides, and drives! What glorious breeze and view from the heights, and what pleasant winding paths up to them! How pretty, too, is the one gaily busy street, and the glorious avenue

into which it spreads, when its attractions are at an end! Its principal feature is the 'Redoute' (now superseded by a far handsomer building further down). Opposite that centre of attraction, cunningly placed indeed for him who has won, or for those desirous to lose, crowd the shops of banker, tobacconist, hairdresser, ladies' fashions, jeweller, and, specially tempting, the repositories for stained and painted wood articles peculiar to the place. Thus the fortunate winner, sauntering out of the Rooms, is tempted in every possible way to invest a portion of his hoard; while the banker will, for a consideration, change any kind of money under the sun into five-franc pieces, to enable any unfortunate speculator to go and try again. One end of the queer little street leads into the much-sought avenue, as I have said; the other opens upon the miniature market-place and town-hall.

Violet was very much amused by the men in big blouses who stand in the square from morning till night. Some are guides, others possess carriages or saddle-horses, at service of excursionists; others, again, simply stand there looking on, smoking long pipes, and making slow observations upon all going on around them. Voilet's *naïve* expressions of astonishment and delight were a kind of "continual feast" to Will and me; and the child soon became quite familiar and at her ease with us two old people. We must have seemed so very, very ancient to her! We were staying at the Hôtel d'Orange, and had spent a very quiet, happy month, when some friends arrived, whose coming brought about various little adventures that have led me into this telling of Violet's proceedings. She had by no means forgotten Mr. Otto, and in con-

fidential moments would tell me of his perfection and her admiration.

"Oh! I did like him so very, very much," she said one day; "so would you, if you knew him. He is very handsome, you know, bright blue eyes, and such a beautiful moustache! Then he used to be so patient and kind to me, and I did love to hear him talk. At last I could not bear to be away from him,—I used to cry and feel so wretched. At least not really wretched, you know, but such a nice, new, strange feeling. You know I have read all about being in love. And when he came it used to make me start, and when he touched me I used to tremble. But now it is all over, quite over. He laughed at me! It was very cruel. You know he found my book of verses, and Otto was so difficult to rhyme to. Ah! Mrs. Bell, I never could have

stayed on at home, and I am so thankful you took me away. I dreaded coming at first, though."

We had walked up to one of the famous wells to breakfast—the Sauvinière, that boasts of a greater attraction than its mineral spring. We had taken our meal out under the fine old trees, and found the côtelettes and omelettes well deserving of their wide-spread fame. My old gentleman had walked away with his cigar, and we two were still sitting in lazy enjoyment, very cosy and confidential. There now drove up to the inn-door a queer old rumbly-tumbly chariot, drawn by two small Spa horses, belonging decidedly to the aboriginal species common there. I looked on in the contented, apathetic way in which people resting at ease generally watch the movements of active travellers.

Out of the nondescript vehicle sprang briskly a bright-faced, laughing youth, with an unusual quantity of thickly curling hair, which I noticed all the more because in jumping he lost his hat. Him followed more soberly, a somewhat older man, who impressed me by his composed manner.

"He looks like the light-haired one's schoolmaster," whispered Violet.

The merry youth ran after his hat, and the other stepped back to the chaise and held out both hands to help a lady in the difficult descent. She was a very tall, broad-shouldered person of middle age, and had about her an air of severe propriety. This expression went into all the details of her sad-coloured attire; her very bonnet-strings were cut into rigidly straight lines at the end, and the tips of her stiffly-extended fingers were clothed in square-cut

gloves. I do not say that I discovered such details in these first moments, but they came to be so associated in my mind with Miss Prudence Herbert, that I cannot speak of her without noting them.

Last, but by no means least, there came forth a very imposing gentleman, with a grand face and air, and a long silvery beard. All my apathy was at an end: I started to my feet and approached the strangers. Certainly, there could be no doubt, this was our dear old friend the General. I had been telling of him and his brave deeds but yesterday. Then I spoke of him as though there were thousands of miles between us, now he was here! I had seen him last twenty years ago, yet I knew him again instantly. He was a gallant young captain then, and had stood in my dead father's place when I became Will's wife. Then I

bade him a long farewell, but I had heard of him ever since; first from his wife; then from mutual friends; once or twice from himself. I met him now with outstretched hands. He gave me a kiss, and said I looked just as young as when he left home. Then he turned, in his courteous way, towards little Violet, who had crept up with her eyes full of curious questions.

"And this fairy?" said the General; "surely I should have heard—I cannot have forgotten?"

"No, she is not ours," I answered, cheerfully. I saw our old friend was distressed by having spoken his surmise "But she is a dear pet, and we are taking care of her."

"Very pleasant care you find it, Missy, I should say. And where is Mr. Bell?"

He came up at the moment. Then there

band who is good to you, and whom you love—why ever should I pity you?"

"You seem quite sure about my loving my husband."

"Of course you do—any one can see that; besides, he is so nice, you know, you couldn't help it."

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and one of the ponies was troublesome, so a little time went by before I asked—

"Do you know what I have wanted so long, my dear?"

"I think so. Some one to call you mamma, and to be your own, own, own pet, and Mr. Bell's, too. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes. Now you know my trouble. I know yours, too, Violet, and am sorry for you, and I think we can do one another good. That is why I asked you to come and stay with me. Do you know what we are going to do together?"

"To read, and work, and drive, do you mean?"

"Something nicer than that. To travel."

"Oh, Mrs. Bell! and am I to go too?"

"Yes, indeed. You are going to be our great pet, I can see, and shall do anything

and everything you like. This day week we are going abroad together; your papa knows all about it, and is quite willing."

That day week, accordingly, saw us leave London; and after a glimpse at Paris, very hot and dusty, but not the less amazing to our little *protégée*, we went on to Spa. It was very early, long before the Spa season, when we first arrived; but we purposed spending three or four months there, and found June sunshine sweet and pleasant. Nor was there any heat to complain of in the long midsummer days that we spent in the woods there abounding.

What a sweet little nest is that Spa! What delightful walks, and rides, and drives! What glorious breeze and view from the heights, and what pleasant winding paths up to them! How pretty, too, is the one gaily busy street, and the glorious avenue

into which it spreads, when its attractions are at an end! Its principal feature is the 'Redoute' (now superseded by a far handsomer building further down). Opposite that centre of attraction, cunningly placed indeed for him who has won, or for those desirous to lose, crowd the shops of banker, tobacconist, hairdresser, ladies' fashions, jeweller, and, specially tempting, the repositories for stained and painted wood articles peculiar to the place. Thus the fortunate winner, sauntering out of the Rooms, is tempted in every possible way to invest a portion of his hoard; while the banker will, for a consideration, change any kind of money under the sun into five-franc pieces, to enable any unfortunate speculator to go and try again. One end of the queer little street leads into the much-sought avenue, as I have said; the other opens upon the miniature market-place and town-hall.

Violet was very much amused by the men in big blouses who stand in the square from morning till night. Some are guides, others possess carriages or saddle-horses, at service of excursionists; others, again, simply stand there looking on, smoking long pipes, and making slow observations upon all going on around them. Voilet's *naïve* expressions of astonishment and delight were a kind of "continual feast" to Will and me; and the child soon became quite familiar and at her ease with us two old people. We must have seemed so very, very ancient to her! We were staying at the Hôtel d'Orange, and had spent a very quiet, happy month, when some friends arrived, whose coming brought about various little adventures that have led me into this telling of Violet's proceedings. She had by no means forgotten Mr. Otto, and in con-

fidential moments would tell me of his perfection and her admiration.

"Oh! I did like him so very, very much," she said one day; "so would you, if you knew him. He is very handsome, you know, bright blue eyes, and such a beautiful moustache! Then he used to be so patient and kind to me, and I did love to hear him talk. At last I could not bear to be away from him,—I used to cry and feel so wretched. At least not really wretched, you know, but such a nice, new, strange feeling. You know I have read all about being in love. And when he came it used to make me start, and when he touched me I used to tremble. But now it is all over, quite over. He laughed at me! It was very cruel. You know he found my book of verses, and Otto was so difficult to rhyme to. Ah! Mrs. Bell, I never could have

stayed on at home, and I am so thankful you took me away. I dreaded coming at first, though."

We had walked up to one of the famous wells to breakfast—the Sauvinière, that boasts of a greater attraction than its mineral spring. We had taken our meal out under the fine old trees, and found the côtelettes and omelettes well deserving of their wide-spread fame. My old gentleman had walked away with his cigar, and we two were still sitting in lazy enjoyment, very cosy and confidential. There now drove up to the inn-door a queer old rumbly-tumbly chariot, drawn by two small Spa horses, belonging decidedly to the aboriginal species common there. I looked on in the contented, apathetic way in which people resting at ease generally watch the movements of active travellers.

Out of the nondescript vehicle sprang briskly a bright-faced, laughing youth, with an unusual quantity of thickly curling hair, which I noticed all the more because in jumping he lost his hat. Him followed more soberly, a somewhat older man, who impressed me by his composed manner.

"He looks like the light-haired one's schoolmaster," whispered Violet.

The merry youth ran after his hat, and the other stepped back to the chaise and held out both hands to help a lady in the difficult descent. She was a very tall, broad-shouldered person of middle age, and had about her an air of severe propriety. This expression went into all the details of her sad-coloured attire; her very bonnet-strings were cut into rigidly straight lines at the end, and the tips of her stiffly-extended fingers were clothed in square-cut

gloves. I do not say that I discovered such details in these first moments, but they came to be so associated in my mind with Miss Prudence Herbert, that I cannot speak of her without noting them.

Last, but by no means least, there came forth a very imposing gentleman, with a grand face and air, and a long silvery beard. All my apathy was at an end: I started to my feet and approached the strangers. Certainly, there could be no doubt, this was our dear old friend the General. I had been telling of him and his brave deeds but yesterday. Then I spoke of him as though there were thousands of miles between us, now he was here! I had seen him last twenty years ago, yet I knew him again instantly. He was a gallant young captain then, and had stood in my dead father's place when I became Will's wife. Then I

bade him a long farewell, but I had heard of him ever since; first from his wife; then from mutual friends; once or twice from himself. I met him now with outstretched hands. He gave me a kiss, and said I looked just as young as when he left home. Then he turned, in his courteous way, towards little Violet, who had crept up with her eyes full of curious questions.

"And this fairy?" said the General; "surely I should have heard—I cannot have forgotten?"

"No, she is not ours," I answered, cheerfully. I saw our old friend was distressed by having spoken his surmise "But she is a dear pet, and we are taking care of her."

"Very pleasant care you find it, Missy, I should say. And where is Mr. Bell?"

He came up at the moment. Then there

was much introducing. Miss Herbert was the General's sister-in-law, and had met him at Southampton with his younger sons.

"Miss Violet took you for your brother's schoolmaster," I said, at this part of the introduction; on which poor little Violet emulated the deepest-dyed rose with her blushes, and when we were alone scolded me well for being so very, very wicked.

The elder had gone out to his father some years before, and had just returned from Canada with him. So these great fellows were the babies I had cooed and crowed with; and this fair-haired, laughing Lionel was the chubby cherub that had rivalled even Will in my affections and attentions; and HE was the elder after all! I fancied I could detect some of the aunt's schooling in grave Herbert, who was certainly very solemn for his years. A very handsome

fellow, now that I looked more closely at him, and much more like his father than my old pet, Lion. Whether from old association, or for the sake of his laughing face and merry way, I don't know, certain it is that Lion immediately regained his hold on my affections, and that I was as enthusiastic in his praises as Violet herself, in whose thoughts he quickly usurped the place of Mr. Otto. Pray do not think that Violet was giddy or heartless; far, far from it, the little soul was all love, and had given of her tenderness to the very first man whom she could justly admire. It was only a child's feeling then; now, I thought, or came to think shortly, the woman was arising, and the child passing away. I said to Will when we were alone after that meeting at the Sauvinière, that between Lionel and Violet had arisen a case of love at first sight;

Lionel's admiration had been so plainly visible in his delighted face, and in his cheery words, when he took Voilet's hand in his. Then again, when we all went to the well, and Violet had been persuaded to put her foot into the legendary hollow stone, and wish, it was Lion who held her hand to steady her; and he chatted all the time. He said how he wished that *he* might wish; and would not she wish his wish for him? "I must not wish my wish myself," he added; "don't you know that we men are not to have any extra chance of fulfilment given to us, like you of the privileged sex. Well, I grant YOU any and every privilege under the sun cheerfully."

At this Violet put on her little pert pout, and replied,

"No doubt the saints won't give men any encouragement, because they are unrea-

sonable in their desires, and don't deserve to have them fulfilled."

"I don't know about the reason; but I do know about the strength and good-will of *my* desires. Perhaps some day I will tell you, and let you judge for yourself."

I can see all the pretty picture before me still.

Glimpses of very blue sky and fleecy floating cloudlets, through the rich foliage overhead, fantastic shadows swaying on the sward beneath, balmy air all about us. The brave old General opposite, leaning on his younger son's arm; Aunt Prudence a little further back, holding the glass of disagreeable water at stiff arm's-length, my dear Will persuading her, in his droll way, to try its salutary effects. Then —between them all and me, and some steps below us—Violet, as lovely a type of maidenhood as I have ever had the good fortune to

see. Her arched brows raised, her sweet lips parted in a smile of protest, her long soft curls taken off the smooth brow, and falling gracefully over her shoulders, and her trusting look and hand given child-like to the care of her bright-faced companion. Her whole attitude—even the soft blue folds of her muslin dress—adding to the inexplicable charm that an innocent girl has in the eyes of all beholders. Of course Lionel had his share in the making of the pretty picture. His merry face and strong figure; his tawny —I was going to say mane, and it would be correct—well then, his tawny mane and beard, and the admiring interest with which he regarded the "child of wishes," as he talked his nonsense—all these things impressed themselves on my mind's eye, and enable me to-day to give you a faint idea of a bygone, but very brilliant reality.

The meeting of that morning made a new era in our Spa life. Where we three had formerly gone, there were now mostly seven of us, and many happy days we spent together. As for Violet, what with sunshine, happiness, and love, she was growing absolutely beautiful; so I saw, and needed not the constant telling of the two old gentlemen whom I voted far more impressionable than the young ones. As for the General, he put himself entirely at Miss Violet's feet, and led her away into an enthusiastic flirtation, which often called for my severest criticism as chaperone. Lionel's admiration was evident enough; but Herbert seemed to heed the child's loveliness as little as Aunt Prue; but then Herbert was altogether so quiet and unimpressionable. With his godmother, Miss Herbert, I had to fight many small battles about the liberty granted to

the young people in the disposal of their time and the choice of their amusements, especially on the occasion of a particularly nice ball. Lionel had entreated so for Violet's *débût* at this entertainment, that I at last yielded.

"You give way to the young people too much—far too much," said Aunt Prue severely. "The idea of encouraging—I may say, leading them on to think of nothing but pleasure appears to me almost sinful. Surely we were not sent into the world on such account. Life has sterner thoughts and duties."

"But we are here for the holidays."

"I greatly fear, Mrs. Bell, you would have all the days of the year devoted to dances and junketings, and leave none for sober works. I cannot but say that the idea of this ball is extremly distasteful

to me, and I misdoubt me much that the effect of such dissipation will not tend to the improvement of the youthful minds of which we have undertaken the charge."

"I am so sorry you don't approve. We must not disappoint them now; Violet and Lion have quite set their hearts upon it."

"There, my dear madam, you put my worse fears into words. As for my beloved Herbert, I shall certainly exert *my* influence in witholding him from these thoughtless pastimes."

And so on, and on. My bluff old Will voted Miss Prudence a bore, and a muff, and all sorts of naughty names; but I knew that, though fussy in words, she was always ready for a kind or generous action. This much-debated ball was the first "select" one of the Spa season, and it had been settled that we should all go.

As for Miss Herbert and her godson, of course we should miss them; but they were not absolutely indispensable. I had dressed my little Violet in snow-white, and crowned and garlanded her with silvery leaves. Over her curls, too, I had shaken a silvery shower, and Will had, with some difficulty, procured corresponding ornaments for her neck and arms. I thought her perfection, and kissed the laughing lips with—I think—almost a mother's pride. Will led our pet into the room, while I leant upon the General's arm. Lionel, tired of waiting, had gone on; but in the pretty rooms we looked for him in vain. He had claimed Violet's promise for the first two dances.

"I want to get her well used to the slippery floor and the size of the rooms, you know," he had said, half apologetically.

When looked on her now, I thought the dear boy needed no excuse. But where was he, and why did he not gladden his eyes with the sight of our fairy? Meanwhile Herbert was leading her away. He had been standing half hidden behind one of the pillars near the entrance, and I caught sight of his watchful eyes as we came in. But he did not join us until the music began, and Violet looked on with a wistful disappointment. She rewarded her unexpected cavalier with a beaming smile, and was swiftly carried away amongst the dancers, while we elders looked on.

"How well the lad dances," said the General; "upon my word I did not expect it of him."

"Such a partner would put life into any man," said Will. "I am going to have a turn myself presently,"

The next quadrille saw Mr. Bell and Violet standing together, with Herbert and me as *vis-à-vis*. *Then* I felt almost thankful that Miss Prudence was not looking on. Of course we had all wondered—first privately, then to one another—as to what had become of Lionel. At last I became uneasy, and deputed Herbert to go and seek his brother, and not to return without him.

"Do you really not know what keeps him, Mrs. Bell?" he asked, looking straight into my eyes.

"No—indeed, do you? I am anxious because he was dressed and waiting, and said he would come on here. Do you know?" But Herbert was gone before he had time to reply: he had muttered, "I will find him," and had drawn his brows somewhat sternly, I thought; but

then Herbert was so peculiar, and might have meant nothing.

We had met some English friends, and we had made some foreign ones, during our stay, and Violet had more dancing offers than she could accept. There was a certain Mons. Déjazet, who had put his heart, verbally, at her feet and at my feet, all the evening, and who was excited by *cette beauté virginale* to a frantic pitch of gesticulation. The little man looked altogether like a lively note of admiration. He capered and figured about our pet, and brought her *rafraichissements* innumerable. She took all his attentions in excellent part, and was grateful and amused. Before we left Spa Mons. Déjazet had demanded our permission to pay his addresses to "cette charmante jeune personne Mees Vi—o—lé." I made some allusion to her about her French suitor, and her

answers were quite sufficient to warrant Mr. Bell in humbly declining the proffered honour. Mons. Déjazet, with his *cinquante mille livres de rentes*, was astounded, and went his way in wonder, but in peace.

Herbert soon came back to the ball-room. "Lionel will follow me directly," he said, and gave his impatient partner his arm. A few minutes later our truant appeared waltzing away with a certain Miss Noble. That dance over he came to me.

"I am so sorry, Mrs. Bell; I really could not help it. I quite intended to come straight here, but was detained, and seeing me come in, Mr. Noble begged me to dance with his daughter, so I could not come straight to you. Where is our sweet Violet?"

"There is MY sweet Violet," I said a little coolly; "and she is enjoying herself

amazingly." Then I looked well into his face. "You are strangely flushed, Lionel, after one dance."

"Am I?" he said and bit his lip. "I am very warm."

"You can rest at your leisure now."

"No, by Jove. I am going to claim that darling, and make up for lost time." Just then he saw her standing opposite. "Oh! Mr. Bell, how delicious she looks to-night!"

But Violet did not come over to our part of the room, as he had expected, and as soon as the music began again, whirled by with Mons. Déjazet.

"I can't stand this," muttered Lionel, and hotter blood came into his. face. He left me, and watched his opportunity; with the last chord he lifted Violet's hand in his, and walked her off, unceremoniously. They went into the further room; I followed swiftly, and was in time to hear him say—

"But you must not, must not be angry with me; I am so savage with myself."

"But, Lionel, I will know what kept you. Tell me; then I will forgive you and dance with you again."

"Oh! do. Dance pretty with me, and don't pout and look so bewitching, or you'll make me say more than I ought."

"You must tell me first, sir."

"I cannot tell you first or last, miss."

"Then I will not dance, at least not with you. It was worth Herbert's while to come to me."

"He is such a calm chap, nothing tempts him."

"Maybe I was sufficient temptation."

"Oh! you daughter of Eve."

"Don't abuse my dear first mother, sir. I never will acknowledge that she was so much to be blamed as people make out. Why did not Master Adam sensibly and

kindly point out to her the error of her ways? She might have been led aright with very little trouble."

"In your opinion, then, Adam should have reasoned with—with a woman. Poor logic! sad would have been thy early fate."

"Now you are talking nonsense, and only to lead me away from the questions I WILL have answered. What kept you, Lionel?"

"Will you come and see?"

"Nothing I should like better."

"Come then."

"Oh! what can it be? Would Mrs. Bell let me, do you think?"

"Never mind Mrs. Bell. Trust yourself to me. I love you, sweet little Violet, and mean to make you my wife some day. Come with me now."

She looked straight into his face for a moment, then gave a low laugh.

"I will come with you now," she said, "for the fun of the thing, and because I am curious, but as to that other proposal of yours I have nothing to say to that." She had a very determined, quiet air when she chose, and now said her words so resolutely that they startled me. Lionel laughed aloud.

"Time will prove, my dear, and I can wait. We must fetch your cloak, and muffle you up well. Now you can come."

I, very near them, though hidden, had heard much of what passed, and now resolved to follow. I had no longer any doubts as to where our pet was to be taken. I left them to go their own way, while I went back to my husband and whispered hurriedly to him. Then I put my shawl over my head, went back to the hotel, fetched a bonnet and veil, and rejoined Mr. Bell at the entrance of the Rooms.

CHAPTER II.

ON THE HEIGHTS.

When I put my hand upon my husband's arm, we walked up the stairs, but did not go amongst the dancers this time. We went into a lofty, well-lighted saloon, in the centre of which stood a crowd. That it was an eager, anxious crowd was my first observation; the next, its strange component parts. I had seen such places before; I had watched the green table of danger, with its weird numbers; I had heard the monotonous call of the croupiers, and watched them raking up the lost money.

But I had never looked with such intense interest on all these things as now, on this night, when I wished to note the effect upon our darling and her admirer. By this time we had all begun to think of them as belonging together. Their suitability had been beyond doubt from the first. Age, faces, and fortunes would be well mated, so we wise elders had agreed. A little to our right they now stood, far too much engrossed by the gambling operations to heed us. Now and again Violet would turn with inquiring look or word to her protector, to whom she clung timorously, then back to the table and those nearest and most interested. Her lips were parted, and all her powers of keen observation shining from her wondering eyes. Lionel had not forgotten her presence, but his thoughts were chiefly with the game playing before him.

Mechanically his hand moved towards his pocket, and he brought forth small gold coins.

"I must try again," he said; "your presence must change my luck. Do choose me a number from amongst those marked upon the table. Do. Only mention one, just one."

"Is it wrong, Lionel?"

"No, no, very kind; quite right."

"Thirty-six," said Violet, and Lionel hurriedly pushed three ten-franc pieces upon the chosen number.

In another minute thirty-six times that sum lay awaiting him.

"Shall I leave it?" he asked.

"No, no, take it, take yours—anything. But come away, please, come away," said Violet, not in the least understanding the transaction, but quite aware of the hungry

and envious eyes that followed the money as it came back into her companion's hand. And then the eyes were turned upon her, and I could see the blood mounting painfully into her very temples. Some of the eyes so attracted were not speedily withdrawn. One swarthy, black-bearded man, with eyes like a hawk, rose, and invited our pet, by look and gesture, to take his chair.

"Mees has all the favour of ze god-like Fortuna," he said, grinning.

"Do sit, Violet; you will not be noticed so much; do, there's a dear girl, and tell me what to play."

"I shall unite to your ventures," said the foreigner, evidently understanding the purport, though not the words of Lionel's entreaty. And he backed quite out and offered his chair to our poor confused pet. I was just coming to the rescue, when

Herbert (who had a knack of appearing at the right moment on this evening) stepped forward.

"You have forgotten that I was to have the last waltz, Violet," he said; "I have been seeking you; come." He took her unresisting hand, gave his brother, who was about to interfere, a look that Will called a "silencer," and led her away. They did not go back into the ball-room. When I reached the hotel I found my pet in tears.

"You are over-excited, my darling," I said, and began to take off her ornaments.

"I am in such trouble, I don't know how to tell you. Will you ever forgive me?"

"Dear child, you have done no harm."

"Do you know, do you really?"

"Yes, I was there, watching you. We quite intended to show you the Rooms some evening, and Mr. Bell would have explained

the game to you. There was no harm in your going, but Lionel was to blame for taking you in your ball-dress." After this the little soul sobbed all the more. I put her into her bed and sat beside her, holding her trusting little hand in mine, until her breathing became regular, the tears dried on her face, and she slept. Perhaps another tear fell upon it as I kissed her, but I know that I thanked God for His mercies, and for the beauty and brightness in this pleasant world.

I am sorry to have to tell you that my old favourite, Lionel, did not behave himself very well during the next month. Miss Prue was in a state as nearly bordering on distraction as propriety allowed her.

"The young man must have his fling," said the kind General; "he has never seen anything of the sort before. He'll soon

come straight again. Don't worry him, Prue; he is a good lad."

"Worry him! What expressions, brother! Counsel, advice, are now to be spoken of as men speak of—of aggressive dogs. Worry, indeed!"

At last, however, things were getting too bad. Lionel took his seat at the green table as soon as the doors were opened, and scarcely left it again until they closed for the night. We all besought the General to interfere.

"Our little plans for Violet will all be ruined by his present thoughtlessness," I urged. Then the father told the son he must either give his word not to re-enter the gambling saloon or return with them all to England, and at once. Lionel chose the former alternative. He must have felt grateful to his father, who had allowed him

to run on in his own way, and given him all necessary moneys without a word of complaint, until a check was so absolutely necessary. So Lion acquiesced with a good grace, and now sought to pass his time, and forget his craving for play, in a fresh burst of love-making. But in Violet there was a change that chilled these thoughts of his. She did not turn from her merry-faced friend; that might have augured hope in the winning her back; but she met him without any of her wonted interest and sprightliness. She did not care if he came stayed, or went. She did not mind walking with him, but she showed neither liking nor disinclination when such walking was proposed. We all saw the change, and I acknowledged that I had been hasty, and that the woman's feeling still slumbered in the little breast.

"Perhaps she will never care for any one," said Will. "This is the second lover in six months."

"She has never been beloved yet," I answered, fearing to say more, as I had been so manifestly wrong in my former ideas. My husband shook his head.

"You are very queer creatures, you women, very queer, and not to be sounded at all. You're either too shallow or too deep; it's not for me to say which. How some girls would have clung to that handsome young fellow all the more pertinaciously, just because he was thoughtless and foolhardy, and turned his back upon them a bit, and hankered after forbidden pleasures.

"That would have been so if a girl—if Violet had loved him. But, indeed, matters went too fast and too smoothly; we might have been sure they could not all end in rose-colour."

"The old theory about its being unfortunate to win the first rubber? Cards and love have something in common."

"Have they though? Then I will thank you for some information about——"

But that led us on to another subject, with which Violet has nothing to do. That young person was altogether in a somewhat contradictory and unsatisfactory frame of mind for weeks after the ball at the Redoute. She made desperate love to the dear old General, and turned her back, as Will says, on all her other friends. I never found out what passed between her and Herbert when he led her home on that eventful night; but I know that she shunned him, could not be induced to take a walk with him alone, and scarcely answered if he spoke to her. And yet I caught her eyes earnestly fixed upon his face sometimes, and I knew that

she heard, aye, and eagerly listened to, the few words he spoke. He was not much with us; he liked walking, and would often start away, with his knapsack on his back, for two or three days' tour.

October was coming upon us now, and we began to speak of going home. I had resolved that nothing but absolute necessity —or a good husband—should take our darling from us again. She was such a blessing and comfort, and so constantly reminded us, by her very name even, of spring and sunshine, and all that is sweet and pure in Nature's day of promise.

How long might she be with us? I thought. I held a letter from Mr. Ashley in my hands. I had told him my wishes and opinions honestly, and he had responded with all possible kindness. *He* would not take her away. How about that handsome lover with the tawny mane?

We elders were sitting out in the beautiful avenue, listening to the energetic band, and the two in my thoughts were walking leisurely up and down. Lionel's arm had been offered and rejected, and he had folded his hands upon his back. Violet, a little pouting, a little trifling, wholly charming, toyed with her parasol, looked provokingly into his face, and gave him pert answers in her own pert way. At last he grew impatient of her nonsense, and must—I judge from later confessions—have said something like,

"You are making fun of me, Violet. I am in earnest and will not be laughed at. I tell you plainly, once for all, I love you, and want you to be my wife. I am tired of all this play. Let there be an end to it."

"I don't think I made the beginning?"

"You did. I thought you beautiful that very first day, when I placed your little

foot in the wishing-place. I wished *then* that you might have put it upon my neck instead, and called me your slave. I would have done your bidding fast enough."

"Now you know me better you want me to do yours. Thanks; I don't care about a master at present." And she laughed merrily enough. Then he stood still fronting her.

"Violet," he said, "I ask you, for the last time, will you be my wife? I know Mrs. Bell would like it, so would my father: he wants me settled; and surely your father could not object. Violet, may we write and ask him?"

"No!" she said, and I saw her plant her foot and parasol firmly down into the ground. "No, no, no! ten thousand times, no! And I tell you, Lionel, you will never change me; not if you worry me all the few days we stay together, you will never

change me. I don't love you, and I don't love Mr. Otto, though you have picked up that silly story, and choose to say so, and—and—and—I don't think I know what love is, and—and—I don't wish to. There!"

"Let me teach you. I can, and will."

"From you I could never learn it. Let us be friends. Shake hands, and have done with this nonsense, once for all."

Of course he would not shake hands, but went away from her with hasty and angry steps.

She told it all to me afterwards, and silenced all comments or eulogy.

"Dearest and kindest of mothers—and you do seem to me like a mother," she said, with her eyes full of tears, "you love me, and you love dear Mr. Bell, and you know how nice that is, and we are all so happy. Let us go on so. I am sorry if he cares for me: I know it won't last; but I do

assure you I can never care for him, in the right way, you know." And she would say no further word in the matter.

After that walk Lionel did not come near her. He was a somewhat spoilt and a vain young man, and his vanity had received a smarting blow, which he could neither ignore nor forgive.

The last morning of our pleasant stay had come. Violet had hurried away to her mineral bath, from which she was wont to return like Hebe, or Aurora, or any one famous for rosiest health. Herbert had been away for a day's walking, but had promised to return in time "to see us off."

After her bath, Violet walked away along the winding path, up to the heights that tower over the town.

"I wanted to take a last look at the dear place," she told me afterwards, "and I marched away, up and up, till I came to the

brightest point for the view. I took my hat off, and stood panting and looking down, when, all at once, Herbert stepped out of the wood. He startled me so! And I was so warm, and so out of breath, and my hair all untidy! I was so ashamed! He said he had been walking since before sunrise, on purpose to—to—to see us again before we went, and to offer me a little flower that he had found. He said, 'Was it not a very strange time of year for a—for this?' Then he showed me a forget-me-not. It seemed to come in answer to his thoughts and wishes, he said, just as now came the Violet in whose hand he wished to lay that other blossom. Then he gave me the flower, and held my hand, and—and—somehow, all at once, he held me too, and I cried, and I think he cried, but I don't know. He said he was too happy. Dearest of mothers, I

do know that I do love him, and that I am too happy, and that it is—so nice!"

So the woman had arisen at last. It was not very long before I had to give into another's keeping the glorious flower that had come so young and guileless a blossom into mine.

It is only a sketch, you see, a little jotting down about sunshine and love; perhaps a rain or a storm cloud, but it speaks of a time that has led to a very beautiful summer in two human lives, now one.

THE END.

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